ALL STORIES NEW...NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

A THRILLING PUBLICATION
SECOND JANUARY NUMBER

FEATURING
BLIZZARD TRAIL
by Giff Cheshire

Beginning
GUN IN HIS HAND
a new serial
by Jack Barton

ANCH FLICKER TALK
The Famous Movie And TV Star
BOB CUMMINGS

We'll train and establish you in

Your Own Business

. . . even if now employed

We are enlarging this 26-year-old world-wide chain of Duraclean dealerships. Many excellent locations are still available in the U.S.A., Canada, and other countries. If you are reliable and diligent, this is an opportunity to increase your income . . . and have the freedom, financial independence, and prestige of YOUR OWN business:

These are full time dealerships . . . but you can start in spare time and have a profitable, lifetime business when your present job ends. A Duraclean dealer will train and assist you. He'll reveal his successful, proven methods and sales plans. He'll **work with you.**

Alert dealers can average $5 hourly gross profit on service they render plus $3 on EACH service-man at National Price Guide charges. This business is easy to learn . . . quickly established.

26 YEARS of PROVEN SUCCESS

You Become an Expert in cleaning and protecting Rugs and Upholstery

DURACLEAN cleans by *absorption.* It eliminates scrubbing . . . soaking . . . shrinkage. Aerated foam, created by electric Foamovator, restores the natural lubrication of wool and other animal fibers in rugs and upholstery. Dirt, grease and many unsightly spots vanish. Fabrics and floor coverings are cleaned with *a new consideration for their life and beauty.*

This modern process avoids strong soaps and machine scrubbing! This eliminates unnecessary wear on fabric and the breaking of fibers.

DURACLEANING is done *in the home!* Customers like this *convenience.* Fabrics dry in a few hours. Rug pile again stands erect and even. Brilliant colors revive. Furnishings become clean, fresh and enlivened.

DURAPROOF is another year 'round service rendered in the home, office or institution—*without removing furnishings.* It protects upholstery, rugs, furs, clothing and auto interiors against damage by moths and carpet beetles.

U. S. Government says **"Moths are present in practically every household . . No section of country seems free from such infestations."** **DURAPROOF** kills moths and carpet beetles . . it makes materials non-eatable to both. **DURAPROOF** is the ONLY moth-proof service backed by an International Money Back, 6-Year Warranty.

Easy to Learn • No Overhead Expense

Permanent, Growing Market

Service is rendered *IN* homes, offices, hotels, theaters, institutions and to revive used-car upholstery for auto dealers. There is need for these services in almost every building. Duraclean dealers operate from their home, an office or shop, as they prefer. It's *easy to learn* . . . we quickly train you. Rendering service yourself, at first, prepares you to train and supervise service men.

Repeat and Voluntary Orders

Demonstrations win new customers. DURACLEAN Dealers find REPEAT and VOLUNTARY orders a major source of income. Customers, enthused with results, tell friends and neighbors. Furniture and department stores and others turn over rug and upholstery cleaning and mothproofing to **DURACLEAN** Dealers. We show you **27 ways to** get new customers.

Two-Way Profit

You enjoy **big profits** on BOTH materials and labor—after paying service men and salesmen. This is a year-round large-profit business. You have the cooperation of a **26 YEAR OLD** organization interested in your success. If you want you should inquire now. TODAY, to become the owner of a **DURACLEAN** Service business, while territory is still available.

What Dealers Say

W. Lookiebill: We've had 20 years of pleasant dealings. I'm 65 but am setting my sights for 20 more years.
Gerald Morriman: $700 cleaning . 13 working days.
P. D. Freidinger: 70% of our business is repeat.
A. Ullman: Every demonstration has been a sale.
Ellsworth: Your advertising certainly has paid dividends.
M. Lassanske: My original investment was returned in about two months. I am not sorry in any way that I started my business 'on a shoe string.'
R. Kimbrough Finished First White House of Confederacy and am to **Duraclean** the Governor's Mansion.
Margarette Turner: Took in $106 in 15 or 18 hours.
L. Johnson: Each customer leads to 3 or 4 more.
T. Kemori: We have 1,000,000 yen contract Duracleaning for U S. Army in Japan.

Nationally Advertised

Your services are Nationally Advertised in Life. McCall's. Better Homes & Gardens. Ladies Home Journal, House & Garden. Maclean's (Canada's largest magazine), etc.

FREE Booklet

Our first letter and illustrated booklet will explain everything — the two modern, urgently needed services, waiting market, how business grows, your large profit, easy terms and PROTECTED territory. Send Coupon TODAY!

EASY TERMS

A moderate payment establishes **your own** business—pay balance from sales. We furnish electric machines, folders, store cards, introduction slips, sales books, demonstrators and **enough material to return your TOTAL investment.** Your business can be operating in a few days. **Mail coupon today!** Get the facts, then decide. **No obligation.**

Duraclean Co.

6-692 Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Illinois

"OWN a Business" Coupon

DURACLEAN CO.
6-692 Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Illinois

With no obligation to me, send booklet and letter giving full details. Tell me how I may OWN a growing business of my own built upon satisfied customers.

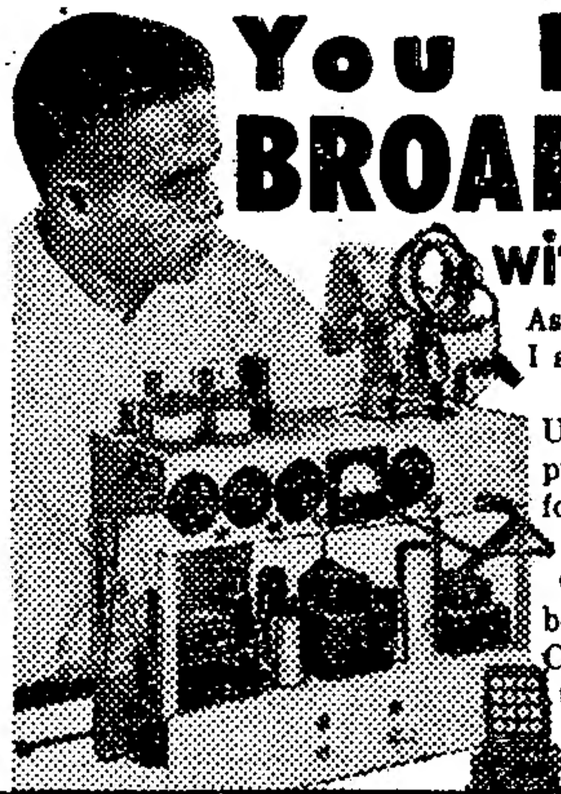
Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

You Practice SERVICING with Kits I Send You

Nothing takes the place of PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. That's why NRI training is based on LEARNING BY DOING. You use parts I send to build many circuits common to Radio and Television. With my Servicing Course you build the modern Radio shown at left. You build a Multitester and use it to help make $10, $15 a week fixing sets in spare time while training. All equipment is yours to keep. Coupon below will bring book of important facts. It shows other equipment you build.



You Practice BROADCASTING with Kits I Send You

As part of my Communications Course I send you parts to build low-power Broadcasting Transmitter at left. Use it to get practical experience. You put this station "on the air" . . . perform procedures demanded of broadcasting station operators. An FCC Commercial Operator's License can be your ticket to a bright future. My Communications Course trains you to get your license. Mail coupon. Book shows other equipment you build for practical experience.

I Will Train You at Home in Spare Time to be a RADIO-TELEVISION Technician

TELEVISION Making Jobs, Prosperity

25 million homes have Television sets now. Thousands more sold every week. Trained men needed to make, install, service TV sets. About 200 television stations on the air. Hundreds more being built. Good job opportunities here for qualified technicians, operators, etc.

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.
Our 40th Year

America's Fast Growing Industry Offers You Good Pay, Success

Training PLUS opportunity is the PERFECT COMBINATION for job security, advancement. When times are good, the trained man makes the BETTER PAY, gets PROMOTED. When jobs are scarce, the trained man enjoys GREATER SECURITY. NRI training can help assure you and your family more of the better things of life. Radio is bigger than ever with over 3,000 broadcasting stations and more than 115 MILLION sets in use, and Television is moving ahead fast.

N.R.I. Training Leads to Good Jobs Like These

I TRAINED THESE MEN

"I have progressed very rapidly. My present position is Studio Supervisor with KEDD Television, Wichita."—Elmer Frewaldt, 3026 Stadium, Wichita, Kans.

"Fix sets part time in my shop. Made about $500 first three months of the year. Could have more but this is about all I can handle."—Frank Borer, Lorain, Ohio.

"I've come a long way in Radio and Television since graduating. Have my own business on Main Street."—Joe Travers, Asbury Park, New Jersey.

"I didn't know a thing about Radio. Now have a good job as Studio Engineer at KMMJ."—Bill Delzell, Central City, Nebraska.

BROADCASTING: Chief Technician, Chief Operator, Power Monitor, Recording Operator, Remote Control Operator. SERVICING: Home and Auto Radios, Television Receivers, FM Radios, P.A. Systems. IN RADIO PLANTS: Design Assistant, Technician, Tester, Serviceman, Service Manager. SHIP AND HARBOR RADIO: Chief Operator, Radio-Telephone Operator. GOVERNMENT RADIO: Operator in Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Forestry Service Dispatcher, Airways Radio Operator. AVIATION RADIO: Transmitter Technician, Receiver Technician, Airport Transmitter Operator. TELEVISION: Pick-up Operator, Television Technician, Remote Control Operator.

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National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.
Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page Book, FREE.
(No salesman will call! Please write plainly.)

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Address.....

City..... Zone.... State.....

VETS write in date of discharge.....

32nd Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND
JANUARY NUMBER

January 13, 1956
Volume 196, No. 1

RANCH ROMANCES

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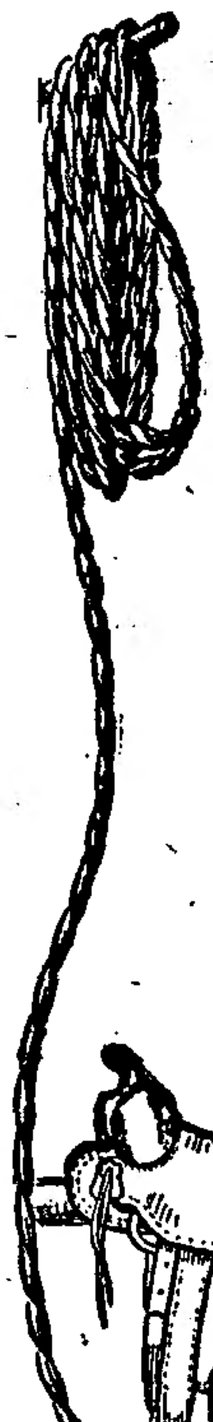

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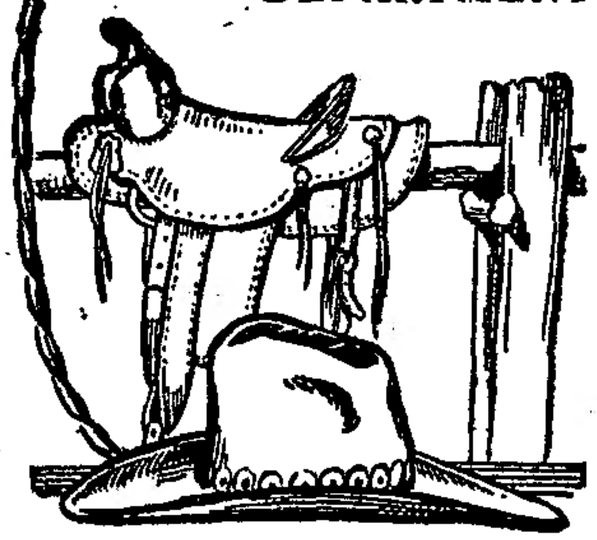

HELEN TONO
Editor

RANCH ROMANCES issued bi-weekly by Literary Enterprises, Inc., 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Ind. N. L. Pines, President. Entered as Second Class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Ind., under Act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25c; Yearly subscription, $5.00; add 80c for Canadian, $1.50 for foreign and Pan-American subscriptions. Editorial and Executive Offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.
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Is Judy Garland's 'Comeback' a Flop?

JEFF CHANDLER: IS HE HOME TO STAY?
Screenland
plus TV-LAND
Sheilah Graham's Hollywood Lowdown!
John Wayne takes the stand!
Marilyn and Yul: Feuding Titles?

Why did Judy Garland lose out on the lead role in this year's biggest musical? Read the surprising facts in this revealing inside story of the most celebrated "comeback" in recent years. It's in SCREENLAND Magazine.

Buy your copy of SCREENLAND today. On sale at all newsstands.

82 P

Lone Owl Singing Cowboy

Dear Editor:

I am 38 years old, 5'11½" tall, weigh 160 lbs., and have wavy brown hair and blue eyes. I have a wonderful stallion horse. I'm known as the "lone owl singing cowboy," and make up my own songs to sing to my horse as I ride along. Would love to hear from anyone, no matter what age.

LOUIS J. THOLEN

Grinnell, Kansas
Box 3

If at First You Don't Succeed . . .

Dear Editor:

This is my thirteenth try at getting into "Our Air Mail." I am a young man of 25, 6'1" tall, weighing 225 lbs. My hobbies are movies, music, and driving in stock car races. I would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world, and promise to answer all letters.

WILLIAM H. FLICK

Room 13
Dutch Pantry,
Lemoyne, Pennsylvania

Guam Correspondent

Dear Editor:

I'm hoping there's room in your pen pal column for a lonely Guamanian girl. I am 16 years old, 5'3" tall, weigh 115 lbs., and have black hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are letter writing, reading, and collecting postcards. I also enjoy music, dancing, and writing stories. Please fill my mail box!

LOUISA PAT CASTRO

P.O. Box 567
Agana, Guam

Farm Hand

Dear Editor:

I am a lonesome farm hand from Missouri and would like to hear from some girl. I am almost 16 years old, weigh 165 lbs., and am 5'9½" tall. I enjoy most outdoor sports. Drop me a line; I'll answer as soon as I can, and will exchange snapshots.

ROBERT ZAYLOR

R.R. 2
Vesailleo, Missouri

Collector

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for over 20 years and really do enjoy it. I would like very much to correspond with women from 20 to 60 years old. My hobby is collecting tea towels, aprons, and map hankies. I will answer all those who care to write.

MRS. DOROTHY MEYERHOFF

1605 Courtenay Blvd.
Granite City, Illinois

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 31 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Homesick Soldiers

Dear Editor:

We are two very lonely soldiers stationed in Japan, and would like to hear from girls between the ages of 16 and 65. We hail from Pennsylvania and get awfully homesick at times. We are 20 years old. Will send pictures on request.

MICHAEL W. MIHALOV
CLARENCE MASSERY

162nd Ord. Co.
2nd A.S.B.
A.P.O. 38
San Francisco, California

From Ethiopia

Dear Editor:

I am 13 years old, am 4'10½" tall, and have dark brown hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are stamp collecting, reading and swimming. I go to an English school here. I am interested in writing to boys and girls between the ages of 10 and 15.

PAUL LOURIE

P.O. Box 1349
Adois Abeba
Ethiopia

Jamaican Jills

Dear Editor:

We are two Jamaican girls who are interested in hearing from people in any part of America. Shirley is 16 years old, 5'5" tall, 122 lbs., with black hair and dark brown eyes. Carole is 5'2" tall, 120 lbs., with black hair and eyes, and is also 16 years old. Our hobbies are dancing, swimming and reading. We will answer all letters we receive.

SHIRLEY DERUIS
CAROLE ROBENTS

10 Cruise Rd.
Celiuderard Road
Kingston, Jamaica, B.W.I.

Mail-less GI

Dear Editor:

I am a 20-year-old GI stationed in Korea, and I sure would like to get my name in your Air Mail column. I have been here for almost 14 months, and the mail situation is pretty bad. I am 6'2" tall, weigh 175 lbs., and have black hair and green eyes. I am from Bluefield, West Virginia. What I like most is hillbilly music; back home I used to play in a band.

SGT. JACK L. CHAPMAN, R A 13453040
CO. "B" 21st Inf. Reqt.
A.P.O. 24, San Francisco, Calif.

Horse Lover

Dear Editor:

I would appreciate it very much if you would put this letter on your Air Mail page. I am 23 years old, 6'4½" tall, and weigh 160 lbs. My desire is to correspond with girls and boys all over the world who are between the ages of 18 and 26. I like all sports, especially when they have to do with horses.

JAMES J. STOBER

Ward 5 East
4101 Wolworth Avenue
Veterans Administration Hospital
Omaha, Nebraska

Empty Mail Box

Dear Editor:

I like to write letters, so I thought I would try to get into "Our Air Mail." My statistics are: 21 years of age, 5'6½" tall, brown hair and brown eyes. I collect earrings, hankies and dolls. I would like to hear from boys and girls around my age, so be sure and write to me. My mail box is very empty.

GRACE BAKER

Box 342
Alcester, South Dakota

Time on His Hands

Dear Editor:

I am a boy of 22 without a thing to do. I am 5'8" tall, with brown hair and eyes. What I am looking for is someone who is interested in hillbilly music or stamp collecting. I will answer all letters, even from persons younger than myself.

FRANCIS STEVIN DASKALAKIS

2714 University Avenue
Bronx 68, New York

Shrimp Boat A-coming

Dear Editor:

I am 18 years old, 6' tall, weigh 168 lbs., and have dark curly hair. I spend most of my time on a shrimp boat in the Gulf of Mexico. I get very lonely out on the water, and would appreciate some mail. I like Western music, and sing quite a bit.

BOBBY PADDY

Rockport, Texas

Stay at Home

Dear Editor:

I am a boy of 10 who has hemophilia and can't go to school or play with other boys very much. I get very lonesome, so I collect stamps and sea shells, but better than anything I would like to write letters. Won't you please write to me?

DENNY SMITH

106 Maple
Duncan, Oklahoma

Determined Type

Dear Editor:

I thought I was stubborn, but even I'm going to stop trying to get into your column if you don't publish my letter soon. I'm a lonely farm girl of 13, 5'2" tall, with blue eyes and long blond hair. My favorite pastime is horseback riding, and I would especially like to hear from guys and gals who live on farms and ranches in Arizona.

LASSIE PAYNE

Route 2, Box 387
Enumclaw, Washington

Off to Serve Uncle Sam

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely boy with blue eyes and brown hair, 6' tall. I am expecting to go into the service very soon, and I would like to have pen pals between the ages of 17 and 22, of both sexes. I like dancing, writing, and plenty of good music. I will answer all letters.

CHARLES ALVEY

636 So. First Street
Louisville, Kentucky

Not at Home in Indiana

Dear Editor:

I recently moved to Indiana from New York, where I had lived all my life, and have not yet had a chance to make new friends. So I find that I have a lot of time to write letters. I am 19 years old, 5'6" tall, weigh 135 lbs., and have brown hair and blue eyes. All of you with pen and paper, please send letters my way.

SHELBY HUGHES

34 N. La Salle Street
Indianapolis 1, Indiana

Horse Owner

Dear Editor:

Here's hoping you'll print my letter in "Our Air Mail." I'm 17 years old, have blond hair and blue eyes, stand 5'6", and weigh 117 lbs. I love horses, and have one of my own. I also like guns, and like to compete in rodeos whenever I get a chance. I would like to hear from guys and gals of all ages, and from servicemen too.

GWEN SMITH

Box 813
Post, Texas

DON'T LET THIS SPECIAL OFFER GET AWAY!

By accepting this special introductory deal, you save a big $1.01 on single-copy costs — assure uninterrupted delivery of RANCH ROMANCES right to your home!

Here's what you get for little more than a penny a day if you act *now:*

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- *more than 100 new novels, novelettes and short stories*
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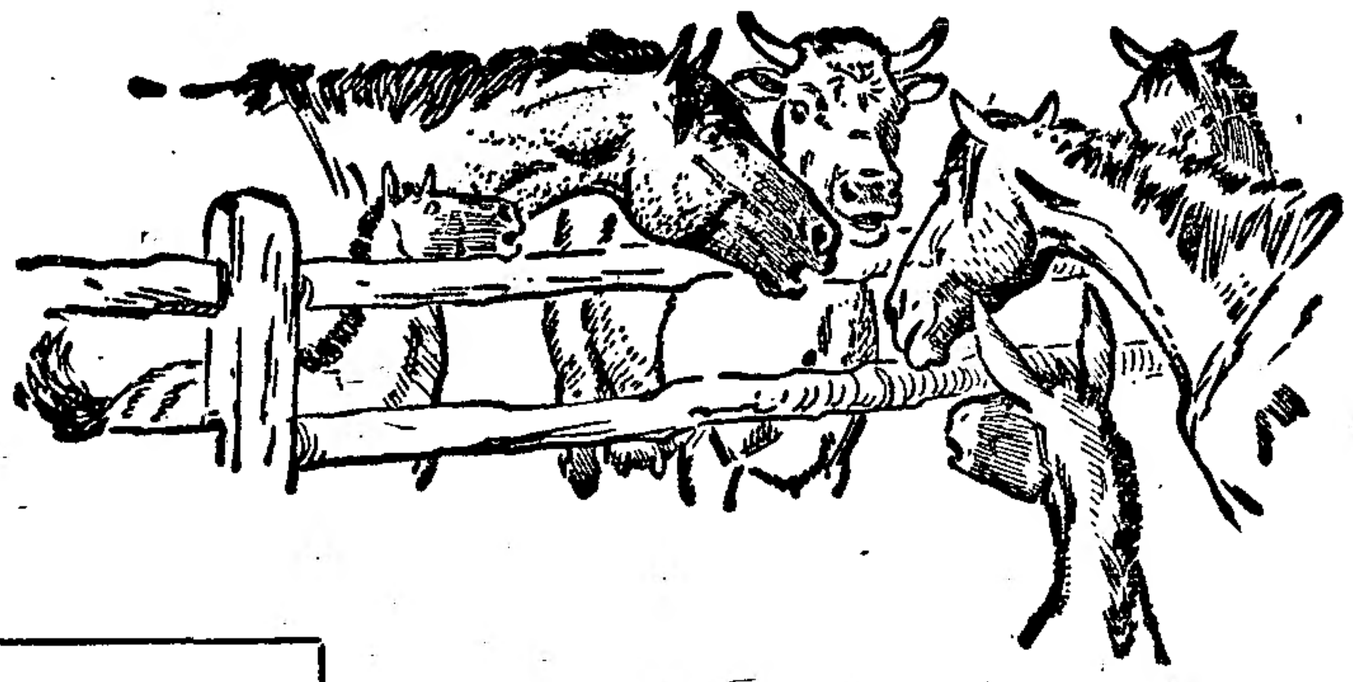
TRAIL DUST



PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found them. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

SOME burglars are too kind-hearted to hurt even a flower. For instance, there's the Hillsborough, Calif., thief who stole 20 potted flowers from a house, replanted them in the front yard, and then made off with the pots.

ANOTHER sentimental burglar in Troy, Ohio, admitted 12 burglaries and three arson cases because, he explained, "I was getting such good treatment at the jail I thought I would return the favor and confess."

NEIGHBORS smiled when a Haven, Kans., farmer draped a jacket over his mail box during a cold spell, till they learned the jacket had been found in the road and the farmer was merely leaving it in a convenient place, should the owner return to claim it.

BEING asleep at the switch is no way to become successful, as one Evansville, Ind., burglar found out. He was arrested after police found him slumbering in an office holding a screw driver, the other end of which was wedged into the cash drawer.

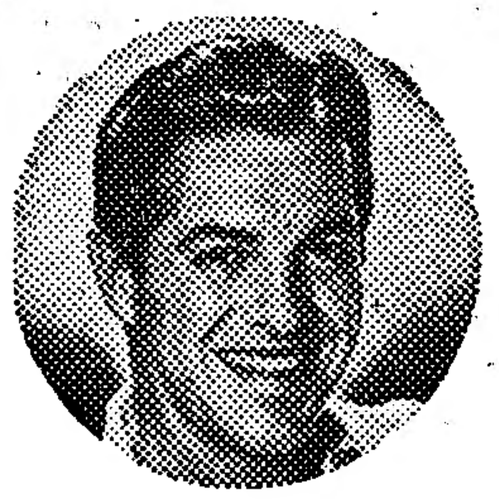
GRUMPILY paying a parking fine, a traveler in Sacramento, Calif., complained he had stopped just long enough to take his bags into a hotel. Ten minutes later he was back with another ticket that had been slapped on his car while he was arguing about the first. "Let me pay this thing so I can get out of town before I go bankrupt," he snarled.

A DALLAS, Tex., printer was furious at the burglar who not only stole $290 from his shop, but also made off with a pair of the printer's clean pants. Apparently the burglar changed into the new trousers, for he left his own old ones behind. But, checking the pockets of the old pants, the printer got a pleasant surprise. He found his $290.

THERE was a $500 fur jacket lying in a street in Toronto, Can., but six men walked by without touching it. Finally a woman came along, and did what any woman would have done—she picked up the jacket. A fur company man, watching, sighed in relief and told her to keep the coat. It had been left in the street as a publicity stunt for a furriers' convention, but fur association officials were beginning to think no one would have the nerve to carry the gag through.

WHEN a certain Texarkana, Ark., housewife wants to contact her husband, she knows just where to find him. She sent a letter to her husband, care of the police department, with the notation, "If not delivered within 60 days, please return." Her husband was arrested for intoxication about a week later.

RANCH FLICKER TALK



by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

A MAN ALONE

Award-winner Ray Milland acts in and directs Republic's Trucolor Western . . . and wins new honors for his handling of both jobs

ACTORS, I've decided, are never satisfied. Take a guy like Ray Milland, for instance. He's been a star for over 15 years; he's won an Academy Award (for *Lost Weekend*); he's got his own TV program *(Meet Mr. McNulty)*.

You'd think a guy would sit back and enjoy his seat on top of the world. But no; now that he has proved himself as one of the most successful and versatile actors in Hollywood, he wants to be a director. And what's more, he has just achieved that ambition, in a movie that will be making the rounds of local theatres very soon.

Western fans can be grateful that his first choice is a tense action picture, *A Man Alone,* starring Ray Milland, and made in Trucolor by Republic.

He plays a Western gunman, hiding out from a posse in a frontier town. The townspeople have good reason to believe that Ray is responsible for a stagecoach holdup, not only because of his unsavory reputation but because he rode into town on one of the stagecoach horses. And when he tries to hide out, the house he chooses as sanctuary is the sheriff's.

The heroine of *A Man Alone* is Mary Murphy, who plays the sheriff's daughter. Ward Bond plays the sheriff—and I'm beginning to think a Western isn't the real McCoy unless Ward turns up in it, on one side of the law or the other.

The movie was filmed in Utah, near St. George, where a whole settlement mushroomed up in four weeks, built to order for the script. Ray told me it was easier to start from scratch when you wanted an Old West town, rather than to remove the tell-tale signs of modern civilization, like TV antennas and telegraph poles, from a real one.

The scenery of the Wild West can't be built to order, though. But nature had already provided Utah with some of the wildest terrain and spectacular peaks in the country.

Nature was also cooperative in ordering the elements around. The studio had sent two enormous wind machines for blowing up a sandstorm which the script called for. But they were never unpacked. Right on sched-

ule, nature blew up her own standstorm, a much more violent and realistic one than man could have produced.

"It was a real blizzard," Ray told me, "with howling winds and drifts of sand. Once I saw the shots the cameramen had gotten, I knew the picture was made, and I realized how little I, the director, had had to do with the most exciting scene in the picture."

He looked a bit haggard when he got back to Hollywood after his first experience as a director. He said he'd enjoyed the assignment, but he'd never be the same man again.

"In fact," he confided, "I'll never be *one* man again. I'm suffering from a split personality."

It seems he got along fine when he was directing almost all the cast. Mary and Ward knew right away what he wanted, and after one rehearsal they'd be all set.

"But the other star," Ray groaned, "Milland, was a pain in the neck. The only scenes he wanted to rehearse were the love scenes with Mary Murphy. He was always arguing with me. Whenever he belonged in front of the camera, he was off yakking with the assistant director or the cameraman."

Ray looked so outraged with his other self that I laughed, but he continued to play it deadpan.

"I was always nice to the guy," he added. "I used to drive him home every night when we were working at the studio—we both live in Bel Air, you know. And it would be criticism and hassle all the way home. He'd tell me how he wanted to play a scene, and it would never be the way I wanted to direct it. Finally I'd yell at him 'Who's the boss of this picture—the star or the director?'"

Ray finally let a grin break through that serious face of his. "To tell you the truth, Bob, I don't know who was the boss."

I promise you, though, that when you see *A Man Alone*, you won't give a hoot about all this backstage conflict. The story moves as smoothly and as fast as though a veteran had directed it, and the star could well be shooting for another Academy Award.

Mary Murphy sympathizes with her father's prisoner, Ray Milland

MARLON BRANDO
An Actor's Actor

RANCH FLICKER TALK

MARLON BRANDO has been the center of several raging controversies covering all phases of his public and private life.

I take no position in any of these arguments. The only firm stand I take about Marlon is that he's just about the finest young actor in Hollywood—and there's no argument about that.

By the time he's forty, there probably won't be room on his mantelpiece for any more acting awards, and I'm willing to bet he'll have won them for every kind of part from musical comedy to tragedy.

It was in tragedy, of course, that he first burst into stardom—as the coarse, overly masculine bully in *Streetcar Named Desire.* By the time you read this he'll have been seen as a song-and-dance man in the musical about Broadway's *Guys and Dolls.*

Now he's at work on a script he chose himself, in a part he wanted to play. Apparently he has been cherishing a secret ambition all these years. He's been wanting to be a cowboy—as what red-blooded young American doesn't? So his next picture after *Guys and Dolls* will be a Western, *To Tame a Land,* which will be produced by Brando himself and which Paramount will release. That's all I know about the picture now, but you'll be hearing more as filming gets under way.

People talk about Marlon Brando's success as an actor as if it were wildest chance that he stumbled into this career. Some of his biographers picture him as a Midwestern yokel, who went into the theater because no other profession would have him.

Actually, Marlon's talent is inherited from both sides of his family. His mother was in great demand for community theater work in Illinois. She was a vital, charming woman, who had a tremendous influence on Marlon before her death, two years ago.

His father, Marlon, Sr., was in the chemical insecticide business, which certainly isn't very glamorous, but his family always insisted he was a frustrated actor.

The youthful Marlon Brando was no great shakes at anything. He was dreamy, his family said, but the neighbors called him shiftless. He was fond of practical jokes. One highly original one involved sprinkling hair tonic on the floor and then setting it on fire. This, naturally, got him expelled from school.

Marlon's two sisters were more dynamic than he, and both displayed artistic talent early. Mrs. Brando took them both to New York for professional instructions in acting and painting, and after a year or so (and one more expulsion from school) Marlon was allowed to join them.

This was in 1943. Marlon had already tried to get into the Army, but a trick knee, from a football injury, kept him out. In New York he enrolled at the famous Drama Workshop, and for the first time began to take an interest in his studies. A year later he got his first Broadway job, but it took three more years for his big break to come along—the *Streetcar* part.

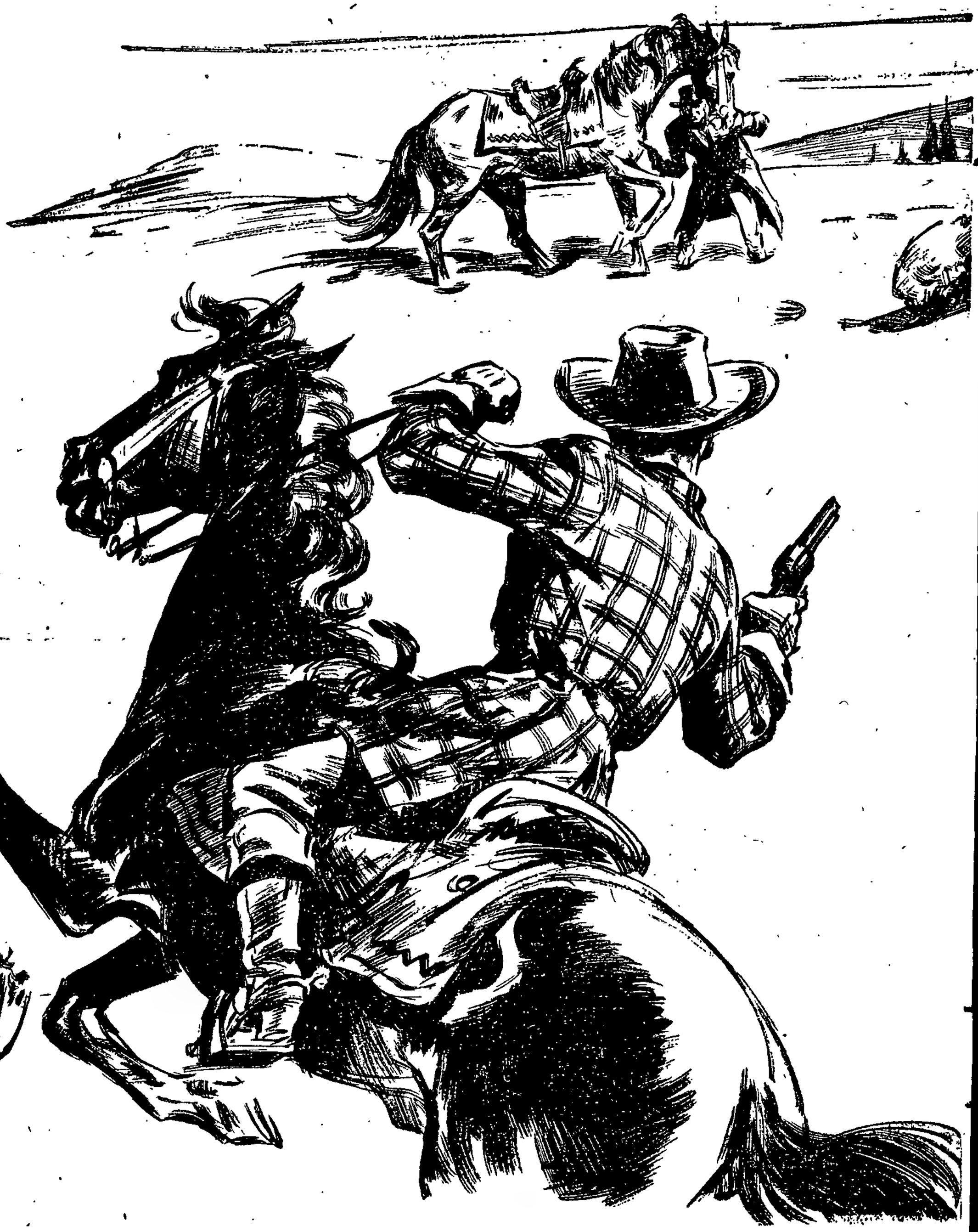
He has been in great demand ever since, on both coasts. But he won't play a part unless he thinks it's a meaty one—and he doesn't care two hoots about whether he stars or not. Every actor or actress who has ever played with him loves him. He won't hog the camera; he helps his co-stars make their parts as important as possible.

Eva Marie Saint, his co-star in *Waterfront,* has a story about him that illustrates this. "There was one time," she says, "when I came close to hating Marlon. He goaded me and teased me until I screamed at him and went for him with my fingernails hanging out. But that was just what the script called for. The nice little girl suddenly turns into a wildcat in *Waterfront,* and Marlon got me to play it to the hilt."

Columbia

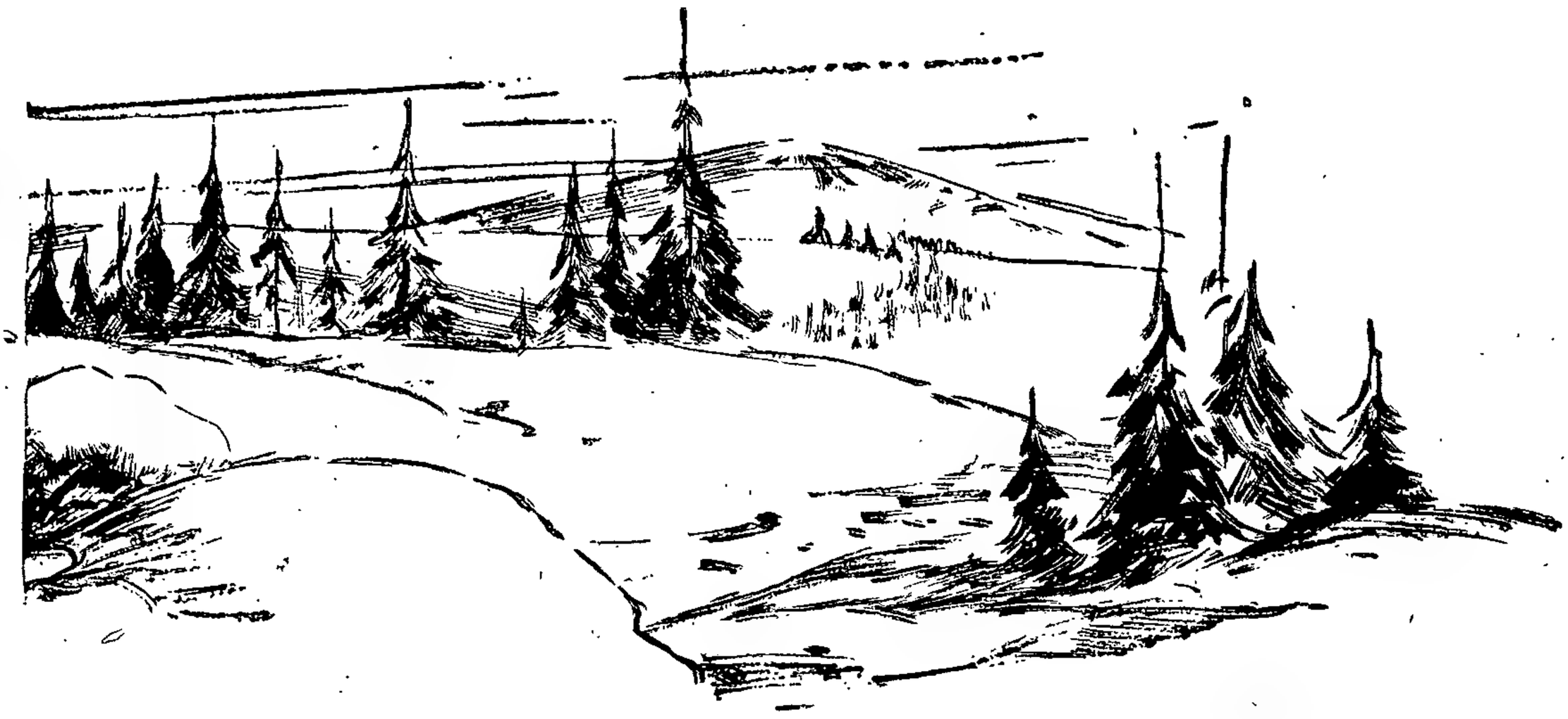
Marlon's about to realize his secret ambition—to be a cowboy

BLIZZARD



TRAIL

by GIFF CHESHIRE



JEFF FARRADAY HAD to get his cattle to market . . . in spite of bad weather, bad company, and a woman who couldn't be trusted

ONE was a skirted figure, a struggling white woman, he thought, and, from the distance, Jeff Farraday saw the man throw her roughly to the ground and go down with her. The spurs on his shabby boots sent his horse stumbling forward, doing the best it could in the snow that ran between him and the trailside spring. After the pair went down so violently, Jeff could only guess what was taking place. But a lot could happen on this flaming frontier in a matter of minutes.

Plucking out his sixgun, he fired it into the sky, hoping the crash of sound would be enough to scare the man off. He shot twice, the reports jarring the icy air. Neither figure rose into view. Apprehension touched the pit of his stomach. Then the land sloped so that he couldn't see the brush by the spring any longer.

Grimly, with a deepening sense of futility, he fired the gun once more. Then he came onto a wind-swept downgrade where he could travel, and he drove his spurs in hard.

When he wheeled up at the spring in a splatter of

snow, he saw that his shots had been effective. The girl was alone, on her feet, and brushing off the white powder that clung to her clothes. They were plain garments, a little shabby, and the skin of her face was nearly as dark as his own. She wasn't looking at him. Maybe she was embarrassed, or maybe it was because he looked as rough as the would-be attacker had been.

Footprints dragged through the snow showed him that the man had cut back around the spring brush. Jeff let out a long-held breath. With his own mount halted he could hear the soft, fast thrust of a horse drawing into the distance. He wasn't concerned about catching the ruffian. The region had filled up with his kind since the gold rush had turned the fine cow country topsy-turvy. One man couldn't police it, but he could give this girl a little good advice.

"You had a close call," he said, "that you could have avoided."

She nodded. She wasn't big, he saw as she walked toward her horse, which was a roan with a worn saddle. Instead of mounting, she stood motionless and thoughtful, still not looking at him, sick and scared and seeming to want to hide it from him. There was a roll lashed behind the saddleseat that also looked shabby.

When she didn't speak, he said angrily, "I hope you learned a lesson from it. It's bad enough for a girl to be out here alone, miles from nowhere. But why you gave that lobo a chance at you, I don't know."

She looked at him then, and he saw that her eyes were a deep brown. "He played 'possum. He was lying there by the spring when I rode up. I didn't see his horse. I thought he'd been hurt or frozen, and I got down."

"He saw you coming and knew it was a girl. Be careful next time, if you put any value on yourself. The scum that've come into this country take what they want where they find it, and you'd better get that through your head, or play the game their way."

He was surprised at the look that leaped into her face. He was a direct man, speaking bluntly of the facts as he saw them. It still frightened him to think what would have happened if he hadn't chanced to come along.

"Please!" she said. "And—thank you."

Then her mouth grew firm. Swinging, she lifted herself to the saddle and rode on toward the river. She left him baffled, with a feeling that he had no inkling of what was really going on in her mind. He found that his anger had vanished, and was replaced by a curious pity.

He followed at a distance, but kept close enough to prevent another attack. Once, he crossed the tracks the trail wolf's horse had made. They ran on west, where the land broke and offered hiding. The man might try to eliminate him, Jeff knew, with a sudden shot from that cover. He kept a close watch on it.

The last stretch to the river was a broad flat, drifted into snow dunes which had been dumped during the hardest winter on record. Eastward marched vast hills that were white dazzles, except where scab growth followed up the ravines. To the right, pine-clad mountains thwarted the view.

The girl stayed stubbornly ahead, but, Jeff noticed, never far enough to be beyond his help. The river short was a basalt bluff, the trail plunging from sight. While she dropped down, he lost sight of her. When he topped over himself, he saw that the ferry was tied up on the far side, across a brown, wide rush of water. He scowled, never liking to be held up.

She had stopped on the landing and dismounted, and seemed unaware of his arrival as he rode down. When he pulled up, she only turned her dark head, keeping her gaze on the rough desert town across from them. He swung out of the saddle and trailed the reins of his horse, feeling tired and jaded because he had polished leather since daybreak, coming in from the Yakima cattle ranges. Big as he was and tough as he was, that was a long ride.

HE BEGAN a light, restless walk to loosen his muscles and throw off the cold gathered all through that day. He remembered that he had more to think about than a foolish girl. The Yakima country had been bankrupted by the blizzard, and he had to do something about it here in the town she studied with her troubled eyes. He won-

dered about her curiously, deeply, but without coming to any conclusions.

The settlement called itself Dallas City, which was pure conceit. It was only a huddle of rough frame buildings thrown up to accommodate the mining boom. He saw with relief that the ferry had started across to their side.

The little steamer put them on the town-side landing half an hour later. The girl remounted and rode up the steep, muddy road to the level of the town's main street. Jeff followed, debating what to do first, now that he was here.

A cattle sale? That seemed out of the question, considering the condition of the Yakima herds. A bank loan? He might possibly wangle one for himself, but what good would that do the other ranchers scattered the length of the great cattle-raising valley? No bank in the country could carry them all, even if it were willing. He could only try, the way he'd tried to buck the weather, the wild country, and the Indians, for the past two years.

He rode steadily along First Street for several blocks, then turned right onto another soupy lane between raw buildings, his mind made up. Ahead was a business house he had dealt with the fall before. A sign over the board walk said,

GARSON TRADING COMPANY

He swung in briskly toward the structure's wooden awning and racked his horse, then thumped into an office that was the front part of a trader's warehouse. An unpainted counter confronted him, marked at the floor level by the toes of countless muddy boots. Beyond it a man glanced up at him from a messy desk. He put down a pen, rose, and came forward.

"I reckon you don't remember," Jeff began, "but I sold you a cut of steers last fall from the Yakima." He said the last a little proudly, for it was still good clean country up there.

"Yeah," the man said. "Farraday. Hear you've been having it tough up there. Well, so've we. It's been a mean winter everywhere." He was Garson, a heavy-set man who handled supplies for the mines.

His mouth pulling bitterly, Jeff said, "Double what you've had here, Garson, and you'll get a fair idea of what it's been like on the desert. I'm busted, and so's every other outfit up there. I want to sell one of you traders what's left of my stuff—which is mostly horns, hide and tail, to tell the truth."

Carson pursed his lips. "You quitting the business? How many steers do you have?" His look showed he had turned wary already.

"Nearly three hundred head, when I left the Yakima. There are maybe two hundred and fifty now that could trail this far. They're dying off like flies."

The trader's heavy lips pulled down in a grimace. He shook his head. "It'd mean fattening, Farraday, and you've got no idea what the freight on grain is. You wouldn't like what I could offer you, and I'd as soon not try it, anyhow." And there it was, flat and final.

The chunky face was set solidly. Jeff knew there was no use arguing, and he hadn't been cut out to beg. He had a pulling, nauseated sensation in his stomach as, turning, he walked out. Garson was the nerviest operator in the mining trade. If he wouldn't buy steers to fatten and sell in the mines, when the mountain trails had opened, then neither would anybody else.

There's the bank, Jeff thought desperately. Maybe I could get a loan to fatten the cattle and drive them to the mines myself. But it was too late in the day by then. The bank was closed. And, as he braced himself against the cold outside air, he knew there was no use asking there, anyway. No banker would consider the cattle as security, and that was all Jeff could offer.

Then he forgot the whole worry when he glanced at the hitchrack in front of the place. It was empty. His horse was gone. For an instant he stood there in surprise, then sent a searching glance each way along the street. A skinny man was staring curiously from the door of the livery barn across the street.

Jeff ploughed through the mud. "You see anybody take a horse from this rack?" he yelled.

The livery hand nodded. "Just a minute ago, stranger. It wasn't his?"

"Hell, no! Which way'd he head?"

The man pointed. "Up to Second, then he

JEFF FARRADAY

MARY CALLAHAN

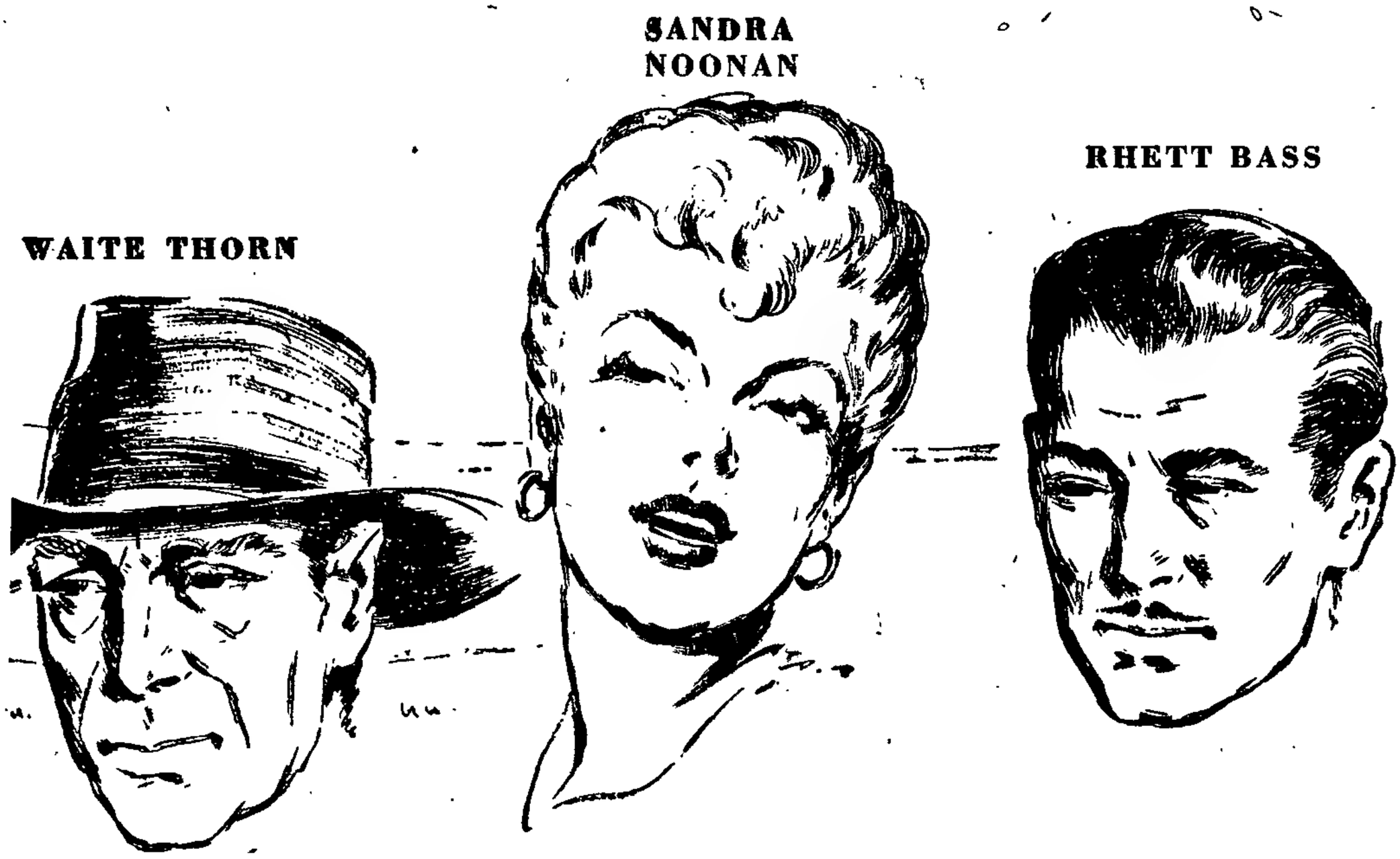
turned right. If he was a horse thief, mister, he's making for the high trail."

"Saddle me something to ride, will you?"

The man's answer was to swing about. In five minutes Jeff was remounted and on his way. He didn't try to find sign on the muddy street, because he figured the stable hand was right about the thief's heading pronto for the high trail to the Willamette Valley. The stolen horse had been ridden hard that day, while the livery mount was fresh, strong and fast.

JEFF left town at the end of Second Street, crossing a creek and plunging out onto the rocky flat that ran toward the deep river gorge. His eyes flashed angrily as he squinted them against the dazzling snow. The drives in him could be wild when aroused, a concentration of aggressive power, shoving aside his natural restraints. The effrontery of losing his horse to a sneak thief had roused them to full cry.

For a while he dogged the main trail, which on the flat passed for a rough wagon road. Afterward there was only an old Indian and stock trail that climbed to the palisades and



then wound along above the gorge. This, Jeff observed, showed the marks of several recent travelers. So he paid no attention to the sign on the ground, bending himself to the zigzags that climbed to the top of the bench, stubbornly driving onward.

He conserved the new horse, a black, going up the grade, but once on the mesa he let it out. One particular set of tracks now stood out. They also broke into a faster gait, and he was certain then that the horse thief was ahead of him. A man didn't wear down his horse in deep snow unless something rushed him.

Jeff's face had settled into an intent mask. He had stalked Indian thieves in the Yakima. Compared to them, this white scum seemed a trivial quarry. Yet he would be dangerous in close quarters, and only a fool would overlook that fact.

Thus Jeff was not surprised when the tracks he followed cut abruptly from the main trail. The change in direction was too clearly printed in the snow to be overlooked, and there-in was a warning that might have been intended. A stalker would reason that the thief meant to fort up for a stand, which might turn a faint-hearted one back.

For a brief time, Jeff inspected the area into which the man had vanished. It was open for a short distance, frosted by unmarked snow except for that one set of tracks. Farther away lay clumps of scrub oak and yellow pine that, with the abundant rock, offered places to hide.

Figuring to be a little craftier than the horse thief, Jeff kept to the main trail. He continued for nearly a quarter of a mile, with the trail swinging toward the palisades over the river. He was gambling that his man would not try to waylay him. Instead, he would keep on and circle back along the cliff top, thus returning to the trail to go on, figuring he had gained himself some time.

The shrewdness of this guess proved itself within minutes. His ears picked up the sound of horseback travel, softend by the snow but upwind and carried to him faintly. Swinging the black, he rode in that direction across a rolling, open expanse.

There was a gully ahead, he realized, for he soon could see the white-splashed tops of trees. He pulled down, not hidden, only waiting there with his pistol tight in his grip. The other horse came on, punished by a gait that made Jeff wince, since the animal was his

own. Then the bay and its rider appeared on top the rise.

In plain, menacing view, Jeff yelled, "Hold up, bucko, and raise your hands!"

The man wore a blanket coat and drooping hat. His face was ferocious in its sudden desperate drive. He wheeled the bay and made a quick dismount, coming down upright on its blind side. Jeff swore, not wanting to risk killing his own horse. He jumped the black forward just as the man fired across the bay's back.

The bullet whined close to Jeff as he charged in, the hoofs of the black throwing snow. The bay did what he had hoped, wheeling and jerking loose from the man who had tried to use its protection. The thief emitted a shrill curse, but before his gun spit flame again, Jeff had pulled the trigger.

He felt the stiff backthrow of the gun in his hand and watched the man jerk up in a sudden agony of helplessness. The head canted back, a knee buckled, then the figure collapsed. It didn't move after it hit the snow.

THE county sheriff was a haggard-looking man. An hour later he was giving Jeff Farraday a sour inspection. "I still don't cotton to a man taking the law into his own hands," he said wearily, "even if this country *has* gotten so that a dozen sheriffs couldn't keep it in hand."

"If I'd taken time to hunt you up," Jeff retorted, "the man would have been too long gone."

"I reckon," the officer said, nodding. "Well, you got your horse, and I have another carcass to take care of. That winds it up."

Jeff walked out of the courthouse, sorry for the man on whose shoulders rested the burden of keeping order in a country where lust and violence had made the job impossible. In the Blues, the Sawtooths, and the Bitterroots, placer camps had sprung up by the score. A country deemed livable only by the Indians, before, was suddenly possessed of a population even wilder and more treacherous. Only vigilante action, such as Jeff had taken, could ever control it.

Jeff had never been interested in the mountains where gold lay waiting to be panned. They were only small green patches on the vast intermountain desert that ran from the Rockies to the Cascades. He preferred the grassy sagelands that were, for the most part, excellent cattle range. He and his kind had come in with their herds from Texas and California, figuring to make it the beef-growing country it deserved to be and might have become.

Instead, there had been a mining boom, while the ranges had just been visited by the hardest winter the Indians could recall. The decent, solid cowman population had been swamped by lawless opportunists and professional practitioners of violence. The breed was taking over, and maybe for keeps.

When he had put the tired bay in a livery and taken care of it himself, Jeff turned up First Street. From the attention he drew, he realized that the news of his feat had spread over the town. He brushed past a grinning man who would have stopped him for a first-hand account, picked a hotel, and registered for a room.

Tomorrow, he thought grimly, I've got to find a way to save what I have left. The chase and its flaming climax had begun to take their toll of him. He lay down on the bed to rest before going out to get his supper.

He had started to doze when a rapping on the door aroused him. He was tempted to ignore it, but his curiosity strengthened and he rose and went over. He swung the door inward and saw a man standing in the hallway. The fellow wore a black suit, and a black mustache stretched across his smiling mouth.

"Are you Farraday?" he asked.

"That's me," Jeff answered, and waited.

The man expected to be asked in. When no invitation came, he shifted his feet. "What I want to see you about is private," he said, "and will take a while."

Jeff shrugged and stepped back. The man came on into the room and, at the rancher's nod, took the one chair. He reached into the pocket of a yellow vest to withdraw two cigars.

"Have a smoke?"

"I twist my own."

The fellow lighted up thoughtfully. "My name's Bass—Rhett Bass—and I'm new here. I heard about you and that horsethief you

took so quick on the palisades. I'm looking for a man with that kind of nerve. I hear you come from the cow country."

"If you're hunting range," Jeff said bitterly, "you picked a bad time of year."

"I aim to deal in cattle. That is, if I can find a man who can handle the saddle end of the business."

"You've got the capital?"

"Enough to get started."

Jeff stared at the visitor wonderingly, curious as to what had changed his luck. He'd come hunting for a market, with little hope of success, and here was a dealer who had looked him up. The way things had gone with him, he was skeptical and wary. Bass talked about dealing in cattle, but from his looks he was more interested in speculation.

"To get to the point," Bass resumed, "I'll buy your stuff if you'll deliver it where I want."

"Who told you I've got stuff to sell?"

"I inquired around about you."

"Where do you want it delivered?"

Bass took the cigar out of his mouth. "Wallula Landing. If you can drive here this time of year, you can drive there, because it's closer."

"There's no market in Wallula," Jeff retorted.

"But there is in the Bitterroots. A big one."

Jeff laughed, then, and made a dismissing motion of the hand. "If there's a steer on the Yakima that can walk that far, right now, I'll eat it raw."

"Now wait a minute," Bass said, and his eyes began to show excitement. "If you'll make the delivery at Wallula, I'll have grain delivered there by steamboat from Portland. We'll fatten there, then drive on with a pack string carrying extra grain. You'll run the drive, I'll put up the money. Does that sound foolish?"

"By God, no!" Jeff breathed. "If you've got the kind of money that would take, you could get a whopping price in the mining country."

"I've got it," Bass said ruefully, "but not much over. I'd only risk it on a man of your cut, who won't let anything stop him. It's a chance to clean up. After that, who knows what we might do together?"

"In the cattle business?"

"That's your line, isn't it?"

IN SPITE of his doubt about the man, Jeff was catching some of his excitement. The trails to the mines had been closed for months, and food stocks from all reports, were skimpy and costly. He and his neighbors had hoped to sell there, once the trails were open and the cattle were back in good shape. This could be salvation, not only for him but for the other ranchers.

"How many steers can you use?" he asked, still uncertain.

"I want five hundred head to start. If it pays off, I'll want any amount you can get for me."

"Cash in advance?"

Bass spread his hands. "I'll be frank with you, Farraday. Buying grain in the Willamette, and shipping it all the way to Wallula, is going to cost like hell. I'd have to pay for the steers when they're sold."

Jeff waved a dismissing hand. "No good, Bass. I might put up two hundred fifty head myself, but I wouldn't ring my neighbors in without showing 'em the color of your money."

Bass didn't trouble to hide his disappointment. "How long are you going to be around?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Well, you think it over. I'm staying at the Umatilla House."

Rising, Bass offered his hand. Then he was gone, leaving Jeff torn between two feelings. The venture itself was sound, requiring only a man with the money to buy feed and ship it to Wallula by steamboat, and another capable of driving across the desert and into the mountains at this time of year. The chancy part was the gamble involved, which in Jeff's mind hinged on Bass himself.

Jeff would have taken the risk personally, trusting his ability to keep the man in line, but he could put up no more than half the cattle needed to make the drive worthwhile. And he couldn't invite a loss to his fellow cowmen greater than that already imposed by the winter kill.

He emerged on the street in deep dusk and ate his supper in Shorty's Restaurant. When

he came out, afterward, night had sifted down upon the river town. The street lamps made faint glimmers along the way, their reflections soft on the windows and the puddles of sludge between the sidewalks.

Ahead he saw a saloon that called itself the Nugget, a name aimed at the mining trade. He was depressed as he turned into the place, thinking, I might as well forget it and buy a pick and pan. The gold hunters all seemed to have money to throw around in high living. They had all the luck.

He realized that the place was a fleshpot the moment he walked in. It was crowded, in a din of unrestrained rowdiness already. The outer room showed him a bar with men three deep along its length. The tables were all in use, and there was an archway in the back beyond which there were other tables and the really big games—and more. Even in dives like this, women were kept discreetly in the back room. The proprieties had to be observed if not respected.

Then a girl crossed the inner space, seen only a few seconds—the girl he had saved from real trouble across the river that afternoon. A bitter laugh formed in Jeff's throat. Saved her? Maybe he had only broken up a business transaction.

He walked on through the arch. This room was shadowy except for light falling from shaded lamps upon the green covers of the tables. Along the inner wall were a few smaller tables at which men sat drinking with loudly dressed girls whose faces bespoke their profession. Contacts and deals could be made here, he knew, but delivery had to be made elsewhere.

Then he saw the brown-faced girl again, standing alone in the corner formed by the front wall. She hadn't noticed him. Again he had that curious feeling about her, that something deep kept working steadily behind the mask of her features.

He scowled, dropped his cigarette, and ground it out with his toe. At that moment a woman came in from an opening beyond the girl and moved up to her. The woman's face was thin, determined, and showed the stain of anger. She said something in a low voice to the girl, who winced at the impact of the words, whatever they were.

Anger rose in Jeff as the woman stalked off. He moved toward the girl and saw her quick stiffening when she recognized him.

Roughly he said, "How about a drink with me, honey?"

He watched her face make itself into the shape of the smile the other women used. She said, "All right," then turned and led him to the closest empty table. She seated herself, and Jeff followed suit. For a moment both were lost in thought.

Then, with an icy smile, he said, "How much whisky do I have to buy to satisfy the old battle ax with your work?"

A stricken look showed on the girl's face. All but whispering, she said, "It wasn't that."

"I know what it was," he said roughly. "She told you to nail a man and get busy."

The girl's head lifted, her face hardened. "And why not? That's what I'm here for. Are you interested?"

"Plenty. What's your name?"

"Billy."

"A phony, but it'll do. How many drinks am I supposed to buy you before we leave?"

Again he saw her flinch. "I—I—"

"Then let's go. Where?"

She nodded toward the back of the room. "There's a door at the end of that hallway. You go on out. I've got to get my coat."

NOBODY seemed to notice as Jeff made his way to the hall and vanished into it. At its end he stepped through a doorway and came into an alley where the river breeze slapped him hard. He pulled on his hat, shoved his hands into his pockets, and waited. For a moment he wondered if the girl had lost her nerve again.

But in a moment the door opened and she came out. Without a word, she turned to the right, a tiny thing beside him.

"All right, you're out of there," Jeff said. "Now, what's your real name?"

"Why do you care?"

"Because you're not as phoney as the name you gave and the smile you showed me in there. Something's made you try to sell yourself, and you hate it plenty. I figured something was wrong when I saw you at the spring. I knew it again when old hatchet-face tried to shove you over the edge."

"I've got to have money!" she said in a low, fierce way. "Now!"

"Have you got a room?"

"The one she—she let me have."

"Want to come to mine, just to talk a while?"

She looked at him through the darkness. "All right," she said.

Nobody objected when he started up the hotel stairs with the girl beside him. Maybe that was because she didn't look like the other girls in the Nugget, could have been his wife or sister from her modest manner.

He thumbed a match, once they were in his room, lighted the lamp on the table, and told her to take the chair. He seated himself on the edge of the bed and looked at her. She was less uncertain and confused now. She met his gaze.

"Let's have it," he said.

"All right. I'm Mary Callahan. I came here because I've got to have a lot of money quick. I figured to make it in the one way a woman can get it."

"Came from where?"

"The Rattlesnake Hills."

The country she had named lay on the lower end of the Yakima, too far away from his outfit for him to be acquainted there.

"Cattle?" he said. All at once he knew a lot about Mary Callahan.

She nodded. "My father's been sick all winter. And, with the blizzards, we're about wiped out. I have to earn money and buy feed to save what stock we've got left."

"Your dad never told you to do it this way."

"No. They think I came down here to get some kind of a job. But I couldn't find one."

"What were you doing across the river today?" Jeff asked.

"I nearly lost my nerve and started home."

"Why didn't you go on?"

Bitterly, she said, "When that beast jumped me, I knew what a rotten world it is. Why should I let my family suffer just because—"

"You'd rather be good?" he asked when she didn't continue.

"I didn't really thank you," she said. "Right then I hated you and every other man, the same as I did him. I wish I were one, though. Then—" Again her voice trailed off.

"I'm mighty glad you're not, Mary." He was thinking swiftly, aware that this was more important than his own worries. The image of Rhett Bass had flashed into his mind. He had held out the prospect of an immediate, continuing market for Yakima cattle. Decision came instantly, and Jeff said, "Maybe I've got the answer to your problem and my own to boot."

"Oh," she said, her voice suddenly low and weak. The light that came into her eyes then settled his mind permanently. "What is it?"

"I'm Jeff Farraday, and I came from the Yakima myself, for the same reason you did. I'll be busted unless I can sell some steers, buy some feed, or do something. A man popped up from nowhere this evening and offered a way out, not only for me but for you and maybe the other Yakima outfits. He'll put up feed to fatten beef and I'll drive it to the mines."

Mary said, "That sounds like the answer to our problem."

"Well, maybe. There's a joker in it, Mary. I don't know that I'd trust the man an inch, let alone two hundred miles. But I'm going to take him up on it and somehow make it come out right for us. So you're going home tomorrow, Mary Callahan. I'll keep you company."

"It's like a miracle," she said.

"I hope so."

RHETT BASS was in his room at the Umatilla House. Fifteen minutes later he was showing a gratified smile as he let Jeff in.

Without preamble, Jeff said, "How soon can you have feed in Wallula Landing?"

"Three weeks. You'll be there with five hundred steers?"

"I'll be there on one condition—that we split the profits fifty-fifty."

"Fine." The speculator's face creased in another smile. "Let's go down and have a drink on it."

"No offense, Bass, but some other time."

"In Wallula, then. Or Lewiston, when we've made our killing."

"If we've made one," Jeff said.

It was getting dark, the next day when, with Mary Callahan, Jeff rode into Waite Thorn's ranch on the Yakima. Thorn had been one of the first cowmen to enter the valley behind a crawling herd, a wagon rolling ahead and carrying his family. But it had been nip and tuck with him, as it was with the other outfits, and he was a worried man as they all sat down together to the supper table.

"The only thing wrong with your proposition," he said as they began to eat, "is that a drive in any direction, right now, would be a one-way trip for the steers. You'd never get 'em back if the thing blew up. Not that bringing 'em back would do any good. Thinning our herds, and maybe realizing some cash from it, is just what we need."

Jeff saw the quick fear in the eyes of Mary, across the table from him. Because it was so important to her, he had played down his own uneasiness when he outlined the venture to Thorn.

"I know, Waite," he said doggedly. "But there're ways we can protect ourselves. Bass aims to feed the steers and sell 'em in the mines, all right. And I aim to see he pays us our half of the profits."

"Well, you're the man that can do it, if anybody can."

Mary seemed to share that opinion. Hope was back in her eyes, quiet but warm. Maybe Thorn recognized that feeling in her, too. He had told Jeff at the barn, where they had been alone, that he had heard of her father, his big family, and his sickness.

Now Lutie Thorn looked at her husband in open worry. A plain woman, she had been worn by ranch work, tempered by loneliness, trouble, and unending danger.

She said, "Waite, five hundred head is too many to risk."

The rancher's face softened. He reached out and laid his hand on hers, saying, "Lutie, we've been in holes together before, and we always had to do something risky to get out. I'll tell you what I thought when Jeff was explaining it. If Bass is crooked, we'll make him pay up and have done with him. If he isn't, and there's a chance of that, too, we've got a good market opened up for our cattle. Think what it'd mean to this family. I could fix up the house for you, and maybe you could take that trip you've wanted so long—back home to see your folks."

"A visit home, Waite?" Lutie asked. For the first time her eyes looked a little like Mary's.

"If it works out, that's a promise."

Jeff slept in the barn that night, and fell asleep thinking of the responsibility he was assuming. He had planned to sell off every steer of his own that could be driven to Wallula, making up the balance of the five hundred head from Mary's father. But, thinking of Lutie, whose eyes also had begun to show hope, he knew Waite had to be in on it. So he would have to cut down the number he wanted to dispose of, which might not let him squeeze through the winter.

The next morning Thorn expanded the proposition even further, reminding Jeff that his neighbor, Plez Henry, also was badly overstocked for the poor range conditions. Plez had a mortgage, already delinquent, that was driving him frantic. Thorn agreed to see Mary home, and Jeff left for his spread, aware that now he could sell even less of his own cattle.

He was uneasy, for to the southwest there grew a threat of more bad weather. He watched it steadily, cursed it heartily, and knew that the whole venture could be thrown into the discard overnight.

He had arranged with Teke Henry, Plez's son, to stay at his place and watch his steers while he went to Dalles City. He saw smoke lifting from the chimney of the dugout that, for the past two years, he had called home. Teke saw him coming and stood in the doorway. He looked as worried as Jeff felt.

He said, "I'm glad you got back, man. It looks like bad weather on the way again."

"Did you have any trouble?" Jeff asked, swinging out of the saddle.

"I shot a wolf yesterday," Teke reported. "No Injun sign, though. Too cold for 'em to poke out of their teepees, I reckon. You going to make a drive to Dalles City?"

"Nope. To Wallula—maybe." He explained the proposition.

Teke said, "By gosh, that would be something, Jeff."

"I hope it comes off," Jeff said.

TEKE soon left for home. Jeff kept his horse saddled until he had taken his own look at things. There was little he could do. The steers, ribby and gaunt, prospected the leeward side of the hills hunting uncovered grass. The creek was too swift to freeze completely, so there was water. Nothing had died in his absence, he found. The weakest stuff had gone in three bitter days, a week back. That was the blow that had decided him to sell out if possible.

He awakened that night to hear a shrieking wind and the sandy rattle of ice against the one glass window. He did not have to crawl out of his bunk to know that his worst fear had been realized. It did not have to snow again. A high wind and its drifting effect would do as much damage. Callahan's spread lay farther east, toward Wallula. But between there and the river landing ran many miles of open desert. One new blast from the tempests, and it would have drifted impassably.

This wind would kill the venture, reminding the stockmen who had grown interested of how flimsy the whole deal was. That meant another tightening of the screws on the range. He knew he'd be apt to find more dead cattle on his own, come daylight. Cursing in futile temper, he lay there without further sleep.

He got up in storm and for two days lived in storm, cut off from all the valley, barely able to venture forth to see how his stock had survived this newest torment.

There was mainly that gusty, rollicking wind that picked up white smoke from the quivering snowpack and smeared it everywhere, a raging ground blizzard. It stopped in the third night, so that Jeff roused from sleep with an uneasy feeling. Yet relief came with a rush when he realized that he had been awakened by the sudden quietness.

Even so, he was dull and depressed, for the damage was done already. A strong herd might even yet be shoved to the grain waiting at the river landing. The one they could make up now could not be, for there was too much drift, too little exposed grass. He was finished, after all, while the hopes he had so foolishly raised in the others were dashed completely.

Around noon Waite Thorn arrived at the dugout, Plez Henry accompanying him. While they warmed themselves at Jeff's fire they were silent, beaten, because their hopes had been lifted, and then dropped devastatingly.

Wheeling from the fire, Thorn looked long at Jeff and growled, "Well, we had a pipe dream, didn't we?"

"Looks like it," Jeff agreed.

"Damn it," Thorn said bitterly, "I wish I'd never got Lutie excited about a visit home. It makes a man sick to see his woman and

Roughly Jeff said, "How about a drink with me, honey?"

kids disappointed like that. Better not let 'em hope for anything at all."

"No," Plez Henry said. "Even if they get disappointed, hoping keeps 'em alive." He was a sinewy man with gray hair, and had a lot of fight.

Jeff looked at them both, savage, determined. "You boys want to throw the whole works into the pot?" he asked.

"It's there already," Thorn retorted. "With the fire out and the pot frozen hard. What are you getting at?"

"Let's make that drive," Jeff said fiercely. "Maybe we could if we throw in part of our hay. You've got that sled with the hayrack, Waite. We can scare up half a dozen teams, if necessary. Why not borrow a page from Bass's book? Feed the trail stuff well a few days before it starts out, then take hay along

and use the teams and sled to break a trail for the steers."

Plez said, "I barely have enough to carry the stuff I intended to keep."

"If Bass can ship grain to Wallula," Jeff said doggedly, "there must be some on hand there already. We'll feed hay going down, then bring back grain to replace it, and pay for the grain when I've collected for the cattle."

"That sounds kind of chancy," Thorn said, "but I'll go along with it if you will, Plez."

"You've got a deal," Henry said promptly.

RHETT BASS and a stranger to Jeff met the cattle drive just above Wallula. Bass wore a look of relief and mounting excitement as he sat his horse beside the wild trail. His eager attention never left the ribby, floundering steers coming on behind an empty hayrack, mounted on runners and pulled by four worn-out horses.

When Jeff rode up to him, the speculator said heartily, "You're on the dot, Farraday. I didn't expect you after the wind we had. How many head have you got there?"

"The five hundred you asked for. Is the grain in Wallula?"

"It's arrived." Bass nodded to the man with him. "This is Gandy Hames, Farraday. He's got a packstring. He and his boys'll help you hold the stuff while it builds strength. They'll pack the feed you'll need on the trail."

Jeff studied Hames. The packer only nodded. He was a tall man, thin in the legs and wide in the shoulders. He was shabbily dressed and hadn't seen a barber in a long while. His eyes were like drawn curtains, from behind which peered a restless mind that missed nothing.

Jeff motioned to the man who had come up on the point of the herd, and swung over. He said, "This is Thorn, a neighbor of mine."

Bass offered Thorn a hand, but again Hames only gave a nod.

Thorn regarded Bass's city clothes and said, with some distaste, "You figure to go on the rest of the drive?"

Bass shook his head. "I have some business to attend to. I mean to set up a headquarters in Walluda for one thing. I'll go on ahead to Lewiston and try to arrange the cattle sale. Then we can get the stuff off our hands as soon as you bring it there."

"That suits me fine," Jeff said.

"You got title to the herd?" Bass inquired.

"I've got bills of sale from the three owners that came in on the deal with me. They stay in my pocket, Bass, till I've got our money."

Bass frowned, while Hames shot an irritated glance at Jeff. "You expect me to put my grain into your steers?" he said gruffly.

"That's what I'm asking. Then we've all got an equal stake in the thing, just as we aim to split the profits."

"All right," Bass agreed.

Thorn's face showed open relief. "Where do you figure on holding 'em?" he asked.

Pointing inland from the river, Bass said, "We found a good place off yonder. There's water and good protection from the winds that blow up here. The grain's there already. Hames and the boys finished bringing it from the landing this morning."

"We fed a lot of hay getting here," Thorn said. "I'd like to take a load of grain home with me."

"I've got none to spare, Thorn."

"Any to be had in Wallula?"

"I reckon so, but it would cost you plenty."

Dryly, Thorn said, "This caper has already cost us something, Bass."

Jeff was watching the rider coming along in the drag of the cattle. Mary Callahan had insisted on assuming a share of the work and hardship involved, and had made as good a cowhand as any of them. Dressed and bundled up as she was, Bass and Hames had not seemed to notice that she was anything but a cold, tired boy. She had told Jeff privately that she hoped to get a job in Wallula. This was the first he had realized the Callahans were even having trouble keeping food on the table.

The riders drifted the cattle on to a river flat above the mouth of Snake River. The grain sacked, was there in great heap covered by tarpaulins.

"It's corn," Bass had said, "that put a big hole in my bank roll."

The camp had been set up under the bluff, a fly on poles, and Jeff saw firewood, pro-

visions and camp equipment. His confidence in the venture increased a little.

Bass and Hames soon left to return to Wallula Landing, which lay below the Snake on the bank of the Columbia. Plez Henry had driven the wagon, and the four of them built a fire to warm up.

Finally Thorn commented, "So far Bass is holding up his end of it."

"So far," Jeff agreed. But all of them knew there were a hundred ways Bass still could take over the venture.

"But," said Thorn, "that Hames looks like something that crawled out of the rocks with the rattlesnakes."

"I promise you this," Jeff said. "I'll bring back the money or come home in a box."

"I know that," Thorn said, nodding.

HE AND Henry drove the wagon on on down to Wallula. Mary went with them. The men were back the next morning with a load of corn to take home to the Yakima. They had talked hard to get the credit, and gave Jeff the bill to pay on his way back from the mines.

"Mary found her job," Thorn reported. "She's waiting on tables in the Little Gem Cafe. You keep an eye on her while you're here, Jeff. It's a mighty tough town."

"Don't worry about that," Jeff answered.

He put the grain bill in his pocket, aware of how much had been built upon his decision to go in with Bass and what his responsibility had thus become to a great many people. He was still thinking about that when he watched Thorn and Henry pull out for home.

Gandy Hames rode in to the new cow camp in late afternoon. He had two men with him whom he introduced as Gotten and Bloom, a pair as rough looking as he was. Jeff took advantage of their presence, that evening, to saddle his horse and ride down to Wallula Landing to see if Mary had gotten settled. He felt safe about entrusting the herd to them as yet. Until the steers were fattened up, nobody was going to run them off.

The Landing was another river town sprung up because of the mining trade. Jeff located the Little Gem restaurant. Mary was there at work, but a glance through the window told him that, at this hour, she was too rushed to talk with him. He decided to have a drink and come back later.

He entered a saloon that called itself the Stampede, finding it to be more sumptuous than its rough exterior had indicated. It had a stage, with the curtain down, across the far end of the room. As he looked with passing interest, a door at the side of the stage came open. A girl walked out and caused an instant stir of excitment in the room. Her hair was yellow, and the dress she wore was more modest than that of the usual hurdygurdy woman. She walked in smooth strides toward the street door, seemingly unaware of the eyes that watched her.

Turning in to the bar, Jeff spoke to the man standing next to him. "Who's the hoity-toity lady?"

The man grinned. "She calls herself Sandra Noonan. Sings here and at Lewiston and wherever she fancies to go. No use drooling, she isn't having any of the local talent. You're the hard-headed cuss that brought in the herd from the Yakima, aren't you?"

"One of 'em."

"Well, there's a fine market in Lewiston, if you make it."

"We'll make it."

"From what I hear," the man said, "I reckon you will. My name's Penter—Tod Penter. I run express to the mines."

"They call me Farraday, and about all I do is run myself ragged."

"See you up there, maybe. I get around."

Jeff had his drink and returned to the street. There was no longer a line waiting to get seated at the Little Gem. He went in. Mary was not in evidence at the moment, and the seats were all filled but one. He had headed toward the vacant place before he realized that the woman already at that table was Sandra Noonan.

He stopped at that chair, but before he could ask permission to use it, the girl looked up. "Sit down," she said.

Considering her aloofness in the saloon, that surprised him. He took the seat, feeling a sudden curiosity about her. He could see how she could be a professional singer, for her voice was pleasant, a little husky.

He tried not to stare, but she looked up from her eating presently to smile at him. "I'm not usually so generous," she murmured, "but I happen to know who you are. We seem to have a mutual friend."

"So? Who?"

"Rhett Bass."

That was all she wanted to say. Then he saw why. Mary wearing an apron, had come to the table. Glancing up at her, Jeff was surprised at the frown he saw on her face for a brief second.

"Just bring me something good to eat, Mary," he said.

She nodded, as reserved as if he had been any other customer, and left.

"Bass is a good man to tie to," Sandra Noonan said.

"Just how?"

"He's daring, smart and persistent. Which I hear you are, too."

"He tell you that?"

She smiled again, and he felt a tingling excitement from it. "He did—for a very good reason. I wanted to know. I put up part of the money he's risking."

"Then you're one of my bosses?" Jeff asked.

"The way I see it, we three are sort of partners, aren't we?" She had finished her meal. She rose, saying, "I'll see you in Lewiston, probably. I'm leaving for there pretty soon."

JEFF noticed Mary standing there with his supper. She still acted withdrawn as she put it on the table. When the Noonan girl had walked away, Jeff smiled at Mary.

"Like it here?" he asked.

"It's fine. I found a good place to stay. Don't worry about me anymore." She cleared the dishes from the other side of the table and left.

Jeff felt irritation go through him. He hadn't opened the conversation with Sandra Noonan. He had been as surprised as Mary to learn that Sandra was in on the venture with Bass. Certainly he was not the one who had dropped the reminder that they would meet again in Lewiston.

For the first time he saw Mary as a girl with a woman's budding interests and uncertainties. He could understand why a ranch girl, roughened by work and hardened by adversity, would feel ill at ease with a rival for a man's interest—especially such a rival as Sandra Noonan, whose very voice could make a man's scalp tingle.

But he had never thought of Mary as anything but a girl he wanted to help. He was enough annoyed with her that he didn't try to see her again before he left for the cow camp.

The steers put on weight steadily, and it seemed to Jeff that each day he could see the increase. The weather had remained clear and cold since the ground blizzard. He was as eager to trail as were Hames and his men, and one late afternoon he gave them the word.

"Well, boys, I reckon we can roll in the morning."

Hames took a look at the remainder of the corn, which was to go on to the Lewiston end of the trail with them. Nodding, he said in rising excitement. "Fine. We'll fetch out the packstring tonight and be all set to load."

"Don't be too late," Jeff returned. "I want to make a run to town myself before we leave, and the steers are fat enough so somebody's got to keep an eye on 'em."

"We ought to be here by supper time," Hames promised.

The days were lengthening, but the mule string had not showed itself at dark. Jeff cooked supper and ate by himself, temper beginning to grow in him. Every time he had seen Mary she had been polite but distant and, as far as he knew, the Noonan girl had long since cleared out of town. Just the same, he felt an obligation to check on Mary once more before the drive pulled out. He wished the packers would come.

Not long after his supper the pack mules arrived, all three packers with them. Hames looked heated up about something, was restless and swift moving. When they had dumped the pack saddles at the grain pile and picketed the animals for the night, the men came in to the camp.

"If you want any supper," Jeff said grumpily, "you can cook it. When it got dark, I figured you'd eat in town."

"We did," Hames said easily. "And I'm going back in with you. There's going to be some fun tonight—a hanging. I want to see it."

"Hanging?"

Hames took out tobacco and began to roll a cigarette. "Couple of damned fools jumped Tod Penter, coming in from the mines with a load of gold dust. Nobody in his right mind would try it on that man, not even to wham a shot at his back. Penter caught 'em and fetched 'em both to town. Miners' court has already found 'em guilty. They're gonna stretch some rope tonight."

"Which," Jeff said, "is something I've got no hankering to see, myself."

Hames grinned. "Neither do my boys, here. The sight of new rope makes 'em sick to the stomach."

When the packer had drunk a cup of coffee, Jeff saddled up, and the two rode down the river to the landing. An electric excitement swept out to them as they neared. Riding onto the muddy main street, Jeff saw a crowd, drawn from indoors in spite of the cold, raw night. Hames was eager to join it, but Jeff rode on to the Little Gem Cafe.

The place was completely empty, and Mary was there alone. She looked pale, uneasy.

"Too much competition tonight, huh?" he asked.

"They'd rather see men hung than to eat!" she returned fiercely.

"It's the only way to handle the scum this country's full of, Mary."

"How'd you like to have a pack like that waiting to see you swung up?" she demanded.

"Don't intend to be swung up," he said gently. "I came in to say so long for a while. We're trailing in the morning."

"For Lewiston? Give my regards to Sandra Noonan. She ate in here. She seems to be very much impressed by you."

"Any reason why she shouldn't be friendly?" he asked. "She turned out to be Bass's partner."

"And the brains back of the whole thing, I'll bet," Mary said with vehemence.

"What's wrong with that?" he retorted.

"Nothing, if you don't lose your head."

He could only laugh at that. Since she didn't seem any more inclined to visit than on other occasions, he nodded to her and left. Her mounting hostility had him puzzled, even though he understod why she would feel that way about a woman as fascinating as Sandra.

BEFORE leaving town, Jeff tramped across the muddy street to the saloon where Sandra had sung. The place was as empty as the restaurant had been, but Tod Penter was there. He was alone at a table, a bottle of whiskey in front of him. He was staring at it moodily, but he looked up in quick truculence as Jeff came across the sawdust toward him. The expression changed when he recognized Jeff.

"Sit down, Farraday," he said, "and help me kill this damned bottle before I kill it alone."

"Hear you had a little fracas," Jeff said.

"Yeah. A couple of crazy damned fools."

The blackness of the express runner's mood disturbed Jeff. Feeling the man really preferred to be alone, he started to turn away. Penter stopped him.

"Stay here. I need company. This is the part I hate. They were a couple of bunglers, maybe scum and maybe only hard up. A man wonders which. I couldn't kill 'em in cold blood out there, even if I had an excuse. I couldn't turn 'em loose to get me or somebody else the next time. So I had to bring 'em in, and now they have to hang."

"You had to fetch 'em," Jeff agreed, "and they have to swing. Don't blame yourself."

"You ever see a man strung up?"

Jeff shook his head. "And I don't intend to."

"You ought to, just once. Men cut out like you and me need that lesson, because we could turn crooked, too. It's only chance that's kept us from it. We're impatient men; we don't let anything stop us. In the right pinch we'd cross the line ourselves. That's something I can't forget. Go see a hanging, Farraday, so you won't either."

"I'll take your word for it," Jeff said. "We're trailing in the morning. Maybe I'll see you again in Lewiston."

"I hope so."

A sudden shouting rocked the town as Jeff came out through the doors of the saloon.

Swinging a glance, he saw that the crowd was down in the middle of the next block, a larger group than had been on the street before. A building was under construction down there, with only its frame mounting into the dark coldness of the night.

A single, significant timber thrust out from the building front. He saw the rope that lay over the timber, then swung roughly across to his waiting horse. He didn't look the other way again when he rode out. His aversion turned to a nagging uneasiness as he remembered the desperate situation he had encountered, himself. This, he knew, was what Tod Penter had felt.

RHETT BASS sat in a chair in one of Lewiston's few heated hotel rooms. At the moment he was playing a pleased attention on Jeff Farraday.

He said, "A man could set his watch by you. You're always on the dot. How much beef did you lose on this stretch of the trail?"

"It's all over on Jawbone Flat, Bass," Jeff reported. "But no thanks to those damned packers of yours. They'd have run the bunch to death before they got here. They gave me plenty of trouble."

"They don't know a heifer from a mule," Bass said genially. "But that's only a little less ignorant than I am, myself. Thanks to you, we've got some nice beef steers here in a fine market—and I held up the end where I shine. The deal's all made, and I got my price."

"Which was?" Jeff said softly, wondering if Bass were going to forget the fifty-fifty split they had agreed on.

"Hundred a head," the speculator said promptly. "I'll settle up with you as soon as I get it."

"I reckon," Jeff drawled, "that I'll be there when the man settles up with you."

With a close, hard stare, Bass said, "That's the price he agreed to. If you'd get in the habit of trusting me, Farraday, we might go quite a ways together."

"Where's he taking delivery?"

"On the flat where you're holding the steers."

"Hames and his hard cases can handle the stuff till then," Jeff said promptly. "I want to wind it up tonight. Let's go see your dealer."

Bass was sitting straight in his chair, looking thoughtful. A contrary impulse showed on his face, then he wiped it off. With a shrug, he said, "If that's the way you want it, come on. Let's go and cash in our chips."

He got his hat, and they left the room together. Jeff followed the speculator along a rough sidewalk that skirted a bog of mud. When they came to a building whose size indicated a trader's warehouse, Bass said, "This is it." There was lamplight within.

As Jeff stepped through the doorway behind Bass, a man looked up from a desk beyond a rough, pine-plank counter. He nodded to Bass, rose and came over.

Affably, Bass said, "This is Oren Fells, Farraday. He doubted that you could bring up a herd fit to eat. You satisfied yourself about that yet, Fells?"

Fells nodded, a short and stocky man whose bald head glistened in the lamplight. "My man looked 'em over before dark. They're in nice shape, Bass. The price stands. Hundred a head."

Not until then did the impact of the transaction hit home to Jeff. Fifty thousand dollars, he thought in awe, and half of it will be split by Waite and Plez and me and Mary's dad. There was a sense of unreality to it when, six weeks before, the four of them had stood on the brink of disaster. The gamble had paid off—or had it? He had a long way to go, alone, taking his half of the money back to the Yakima.

Oren Fells appeared to have been in the mining trade long enough to lose his own awe of such huge business transactions. Opening the safe, he brought out gold dust pokes, which he began to weigh on a pair of balance scales.

"Divide it into two piles." Bass said with a laugh. "I'm not so sure this partner of mine trusts me to divide it."

Fells shrugged and obliged. He appeared to be honest, and he could afford to be, for he probably would double his money before the beef reached the miners' tables.

Jeff signed over the cattle, satisfied with the deal so far. Bass seemed to want to talk a while with Fells, so Jeff emerged onto the

street alone. The fortune he carried had him nervous already, and he flung an uneasy glance both ways along the street. More and more he realized that the gold dust would be an invitation to murder, every mile of the way home to the valley.

He stopped at the hotel hitchrack, where he had left his horse, and divided the dust pokes into the saddle pockets. Afterward he took the mount to the livery stable, where he ordered it a feed of grain. Carrying the heavy saddlebags, he returned to the hotel, signed for a room, and went up to it immediately. Abruptly the fatigues piled up through the hard winter bore down.

He pushed the heavy saddlebags under the bed, aware that deep, restful sleep would be denied him until he was back on the Yakima. The door had no lock, so he propped a chair under its knob, then stretched out on the bed with his gun under the pillow. He was soon asleep.

IT WAS a light, restless slumber that let him hear instantly the knuckles that, a great while later, rapped quietly on his door. There was no one he wanted to see in this town again, with the exception of the express runner, Tod Penter. On the chance that the visitor might be Penter, Jeff rose, moved the chair quietly and opened up.

His tiredness disappeared instantly. Sandra Noonan stood in the shadows of the hallway, smiling at him. She wore a fur coat and hat, and her cheeks were red from the chill street air.

"Come in," he said.

She was quite agreeable, although he didn't think she made a practice of visiting men's hotel rooms. She didn't speak until he had closed the door.

Then she said, "Rhett told me you were in town. I expected to see you around. Why haven't I?"

He pointed. "That's the first bed I've seen in a long while. I hankered to try it."

His uncertainty left him, and when he offered to help her out of her coat she accepted. Then she removed the perky little hat and tossed it onto the bed. She took a seat there, looking up at him with a small, curious kind of smile.

She said, "So you got here with your cattle."

"That's finished business."

"I hope not."

"How come?"

"I need a man like you."

He was wary, puzzled, yet he could feel the heat of his blood build up. In the mellow yellow of the lamplight, her hair and eyes had an exciting glow.

"That," he said flatly, "could be taken a lot of ways, Sandra. Do I get my pick?"

The eyes narrowed a little, then she laughed. "I didn't mean to be provocative. But from what I've seen of you so far, you might be the man who could help me. The cattle deal paid handsomely; and I know I owe more to you for that than I do to Rhett."

"In other words, let's do it again?"

"Why not?"

"In the first place, I wouldn't trust Bass any farther than I could throw a railroad engine."

She nodded. "He knows you feel that way. Maybe he'd cut a corner if he could, but believe me he's on the up and up with you. He needs you. What he wants to do, and what I want to do, depends entirely on a man of your abilities. There aren't very many around."

"Well, he sent nice bait," Jeff mused. "But if I turn cattle dealer, I'll go on my own."

"Have you got the money?"

"Enough for a shoestring start."

She rose and came forward, looking up into his face very earnestly. Softly, she said, "I wish you could see what I do—how much more than that you could be capable of if you wanted."

He saw the excitement that had come into her eyes, and its counterpart flamed higher in him. Roughly, he said, "Is that an invitation?"

"Make it one, if you like."

She was smiling as his arms caught and pulled her to him. She was quiet, a liveliness without motion, as he drew her tight. Then her lips were wild, stirring things beneath his, for an unruly moment. Then, with a little laugh, she stepped back, her hands against his chest, holding him off.

"You *are* sudden," she murmured. "I was

only talking about future events. Now I've got to go, really. But I had to see you before you left town."

"Bass send you?"

"As a matter of fact, he'd be very annoyed with me for coming to your room."

He helped her back into her coat, his flesh still tingling from her and the excitement that lingered in her eyes. She couldn't be faking that, unless the thing her emotions required was different from the needs of his own. She put on the fur hat carelessly, but the effect was beautiful.

"Until the next time," she said, and was gone.

He stood there for a long moment, then rolled a cigarette. He paced the room as he thought it all over carefully. A great deal of good could come from his continuing to work with Bass. He could get farther that way in a year than in five on a cattle layout. There was not only the Yakima in need of a good, steady market, but the John Day and Crooked River countries, each region a vast and promising cattle range.

He distrusted Bass utterly, but so far had held his own against him. It was at least worth talking over with the man. He got into his own coat. Then, for the first time since the exhilaration of Sandra's visit, he remembered the gold dust he was responsible for. He removed the coat with a sense of deflation. The girl had got into his blood a great deal more than he had realized.

HE WAS not very surprised when Rhett Bass knocked on his door a half hour later. The speculator had a genial look on his face as stepped in, and a fragrant cigar was clenched in his teeth. He shoved back his hat and removed the weed as he took the room's one chair.

"Well, you've bailed some neighbors out of trouble," he commented. "Now you're free to think about making real money for Jeff Farraday."

Dropping his weight onto the edge of the bed, all too aware of Sandra's recent presence there, Jeff said, "You want to start a second round?"

"Not on the same terms."

"Oh. You were too big hearted."

"Not with you, with the others. Next time, we buy the steers at a reasonable price and pocket the profits ourselves. If we do the work and run the risks, that's no more than fair."

"I reckon," Jeff admitted. "Does Sandra Noonan stay in?"

Bass looked at him sharply. "You know her?"

"And that she put up part of the money you bought the grain with."

"All right, she did," Bass said with annoyance. "And she'd have to stay in, for it happens that I hope to make her my wife."

Jeff buttoned his lip on that subject, though he was sure that Sandra's interest was straying without Bass's knowledge.

"Even so," Bass resumed then, "we can all earn profits that make this killing look like penny ante."

"You won't have a starved market very long," Jeff retorted. "As soon as the trails clear there'll be plenty of competition."

"That's right." Bass's fleshy mouth made a hint of a smile. "And that's where a man like you needs a man like me, Farraday—one who knows all the ways to skin a cat."

"What's the next way?"

The speculator looked at him for a long, shrewd moment. "You know the cow country. You handle steers like you thought with their heads. You have a do-or-die kind of push that's just what I need."

"Get to the point, Bass," Jeff rapped. "You're trying to say I have all the right qualities—for what?"

"For maybe making part of our deliveries out of free beef."

Jeff sucked in a long breath, staring. "That sounds like you meant rustling."

"Call it that."

"You can get the hell out of my room, Bass," he breathed.

"Now, wait a minute," the man retorted. "Who's getting rich in this country, the honest men, cowman, miner, or what have you? It's the ones with brains and the nerve to carry out their ideas that are making it, and big."

"That's got nothing to do with me and you. Go on, get out."

The speculator studied him for several

breaths, the expression on his features changing slowly from a wheedling geniality to a hard truculence. He had made a mistake and knew it.

"Now, just a minute," he returned. "You aren't so important ot me that I can't find somebody else."

"You start rustling cattle, Bass, and I'll see you hung."

"If that's your attitude, you won't live long enough to do it, my friend."

Bass had given up, was no longer making an effort to conceal his real feeling for the man he faced. He had made his new proposition, and it was hard not to conclude that Sandra had come here to pave the way for it. The illusion about her was gone, shattered by the look on the trader's face.

"If you mean that, Bass," Jeff breathed, "you were a fool to warn me. I'm a cowman. You know I'll spoil your game."

"I don't very often play the fool, Farraday."

Bass walked to the door and went out.

JEFF was astonished to see Gandy Hames's packstring pull out in the early morning hours, Bass with it, leaving the flat west of the Snake and heading into the crinkled hills. He had hoped to trail ahead of them, but had not anticipated that Bass would quit the mining camp so soon. There was a worry in that for Jeff, and he considered laying over a day or two before he sarted downcountry himself.

But his restlessness would not permit that, and he was only two hours behind the pack train when he crossed the river himself and was on the trail. He followed the regular freight road that, with the weather moderated a little, had become bottomless with mud. Leaving the valley of the river, the way wound upward onto the slopes of treeless, snow-blanketed hills. Afterward he came to a rolling bench from which, on this clear cold day, he could see southward to the timbered Blues.

The hoofs of Hames's mules made a smeary stitching along the trailside, with the string traveling faster than Jeff had expected. But he didn't try to overtake and get ahead of them as yet, although something about their swift rate of travel made him uneasy. Once they had come down into the lower country it would be easier, safer to cut around them Meanwhile the land roundabout was open for a considerable distance, the white sidescapes wheeling away with good visibility.

Thus, on an open flat and with the view still good all around him, he was shocked numb. From somewhere on the dazzling expanse of white came the sharp, vicious crack of a rifle shot. The impact congealed his mind as he flung a desperate look at the empty open country. Then came a second shot, and he spilled out of leather, hitting flat and limp in the mud.

He clawed for his sixshooter, then saw his horse, still on its feet but with blood pumping from its nostrils. It collapsed slowly, wheezingly, settling into the mire where he lay. Cursing heartily, Jeff began to thaw enough mentally to see how it had happened to him

Hames or Bass, he thought bitterly, had dropped out up ahead and crawled off into the snow to fort up so close to town he wouldn't be expecting trouble. He wiped the mud from the gun and found that its barrel was still clean. The horse had quit threshing, and he realized that it was dead.

The shots had come from the right side of the trail. The would-be killer was apt to move in when he deemed it safe. Jeff started crawling, intending to deliver a surprise of his own.

For a time he slithered on along the trail itself, the snow at the sides keeping him covered. Then he turned out into the vast white field, pressing as flat to the ground as he could manage. From the sharp sound of the two shots, his man was not far from the trail. He meant to circle, cut the fellow's sign, then come in on him from an unexpected direction.

When he had moved some two hundred feet he paused, lying quietly, his breath running shallow. He took a look back at the trail but could see nothing from that position. The attacker was still hiding somewhere in the blanched openess. His eyes narrowing, Jeff bent to the right. Within the minute he had come to the long, dragged lines made by a crawling man. They went in toward the trail, then came back again.

He lay there trying to puzzle it out. The ambusher had not tried to get to the downed horse and the treasure it carried. It seemed unbelievable that Bass would try to kill him, with no designs on that small fortune in gold dust. He turned left along the tracks, following the departing man. There had been only one of them here; he was sure of that. When pulling away from the trail the fellow had moved faster than when going in.

As he advanced steadily, Jeff grew aware that the ground had begun to fall away. Presently he saw more of the plan. He was then moving down the gentle slope of a wide, flat-bottomed ravine. From the trail it had not been apparent to the eye, buried in the monotony of level, white-blanketed terrain. The man had come in along the draw from up the trail. He probably had a horse down in the cover. He might intend to get it before finishing off his supposed victim.

Jeff kept moving. Then suddenly he heard the muted yet detectable hoof thrusts of a moving horse. Rage and recklessness lifted him to his feet. Below, a man had piled onto a horse and was heading it west. The horse was one of Hames's string. the rider was the packer's helper, Gotten.

He lost his nerve when he realized he didn't get me, Jeff thought. When he flung an angry shot, Gotten went flat on the horse, then fired back, forcing Jeff down again. When he risked another look, the man had drawn out of pistol range, was flogging his horse desperately.

Rising then, Jeff moved back toward the main trail. A few minutes later he topped the climb to pull up again in surprise. There was another horse out of Hames's saddle string down where the bay had fallen. Bloom was just rising to the saddle. He was too far away for effect, but Jeff fired two swift, furious shots at him. This horse could travel faster than the first, as it lined out along the trail that had been broken by Gotten. Floundering as he lunged forward, Jeff shot yet again. By then the target was well away from him.

ARRIVED at the trail, Jeff saw that the saddlebags had been removed from his downed bay. Too late he understood the full nature of the trap into which he had fallen. Alerted now, he saw in the forward distance a place where the trail apparently dipped a little. The ravine crossed it there.

Bloom had waited while Gotten crawled out and back to lay the ambush. They had probably hoped to shoot the rider out of the saddle. Then Bloom, waiting where the trail dipped, could have rushed in to catch the treasure-laden horse. But the horse had been dropped, its rider left whole and full of fight. So Bloom had rushed in to collect the gold dust, and they had been satisfied to get away with that.

Anger shook Jeff again and again as he worked the saddle off the dead horse. By then he was thinking of Thorn and Henry, and above all of Mary Callahan and her sick father. He wasn't going to have her hustling, even yet, to take care of her family. Carrying the saddle, he started back to Lewiston on foot.

He tramped into the town just after noon, seeing once more the stirrings of a mining camp and realizing, even more plainly than before, the lusts and passions that seethed beneath the surface. His face had turned haggard, yet was grimly cold in its purpose.

He had no idea where Sandra was staying, but intended to find her. At the third hotel he tried he was successful.

"But she doesn't want any company," the desk clerk said. "Those are her flat orders."

"She'll want to see me," Jeff growled. "What's her room number?"

"All right, it's twenty-one. But don't say I didn't warn you."

Sandra came to the door at once when Jeff rapped. "Why, hello," she breathed. "I thought you'd left for below."

He pushed his way in, even though she was uncertain about letting him. He knew that his face wore a look savage enough to disturb anybody, but he didn't moderate his expression.

"After your little call last night," he said, in a slow voice, "Rhett Bass propositioned me to go into cattle rustling with him. Does that surprise you?"

"Rustling?" Sandra breathed. "Why, the fool!" She laughed. "And he calls himself smart!"

He knew then that he had brought news to her. Yet her shock seemed to be less at the

proposal than at Bass's lack of judgment in making it to Jeff Farraday.

"He was smart enough to realize, afterward, that he had to protect himself," Jeff resumed. "His men waylaid me not five miles out of town. I skinned through, but they got the gold dust I was packing."

"They did?" He would have given much for eyes that would let him see into her mind. "Jeff, what can I do to help you?"

"I'm cleaned out. Lend me enough dust to buy a horse, and I'll take care of the rest."

"Certainly," Sandra said promptly. "But I'm starting down on the stage tomorrow. Why don't you wait and go with me?"

"I figure to have my hands on Rhett Bass before then."

"I hope you do, Jeff. And tell him for me I hope he hangs."

"So the partnership's busted up completely?"

"That one." She smiled at him. "And I think it happened back when you first came along."

But Jeff was not on the trail until midafternoon, and he knew by then that there was little hope of overtaking Bass and the packers. They kept pushing on ahead of him. Since his own horse, the new black he had bought from a Lewiston dealer, could not stand crowding in the heavy underfooting any better than their animals, Jeff began to cool down and put together a less headlong plan.

Bass was not apt to clear out of the country, even if he did possess twenty-five thousand dollars in stolen gold dust. He had opened an office in Wallula from which to conduct further cattle speculations, honest and otherwise. The profits he could realize staggered the imagination, and he would not give them up without a desperate fight.

So Jeff gave a decent consideration to the horse carrying him, and passed that night at O'Leary's roadhouse. Wallula lay under a cold, glowering sky when he rode it the next evening. Regardless of the inhuman punishment to the horses and mules, the packstring had kept ahead of him.

Coming onto the muddy street of the teeming river landing, Jeff saw the Little Gem Cafe and remembered Mary Callahan. His sense of failure and guilt turned in him, and he knew he would rather have his hide peeled off than to face her now. He went on to a livery barn and put up the black. Then he took a room in the Bank Hotel. It wasn't easy on his pride that he was paying his way now with gold dust borrowed from Sandra.

He remembered, as he walked the floor of the room, that he had eaten nothing since that morning. It began to dawn on him, also, that there was no assurance he would survive the showdown with Bass. He had to tell Mary what had happened to the money for the cattle. If something happened to him, Waite Thorn and Plez Henry would know where to look for it, and would also be warned that Bass intended to go in for rustling.

HE WENT down to the street immediately, crossed it, and walked on along the crowded, mud-trampled walk to the Little Gem. The supper hour was just past. Clearing a table close to the door, Mary looked up and saw him come in. Her face lost its careful reserve, and the look that replaced it was almost a look of delight.

"Jeff, you're back!"

He looked about. There was no one else in the outer part of the restaurant. In a lowered voice he said, "And I failed in the job, Mary. I lost the gold dust."

"Oh, Jeff, how?"

He told her what had hapepned, concluding, "I might be bringing danger to you if I'm seen talking to you. But if anything should happen to me, you're the only one who could get word to Waite and Plez."

"They didn't hurt you," she said fiercely, "and that's all that matters." The intensity of her face showed that she meant it deeply.

He smiled softly, saying, "Thanks, Mary. But the dust matters, too."

"I'll be thinking about you, Jeff," she whispered.

Someone came in then, and Jeff had his supper. He was casual, afterward, when he paid Mary for the meal. She didn't look up at him, perhaps afraid of what her eyes might show. Yet he felt better than he had in days when he walked out into the wintry street.

He tramped the town and, at the end of the third block, saw up the side street the part of an overhanging sign that was illuminated by

the windows of the building below. It read:

BASS CATTLE COMPANY

Jeff felt his heart quicken its beat when he passed a window and saw that Bass was inside, seated at a desk. Gotten and Bloom must surely have realized that they had been seen and identified during their ambush attempt. So Bass knew well that he had a showdown to face before he could launch himself in his new enterprises with any kind of confidence. Jeff twisted the knob and walked through the door.

Bass flung him a quick stare, although his face showed only an alert tensing and not surprise. Then the features relaxed, and Jeff could appreciate the will power required to do it.

"So you're back, Farraday," the speculator drawled. "Any trouble?"

"Cut it out, Bass," Jeff rapped. "You know there was trouble and just what it was, and that I'm here about it."

"What in tunket are you talking about?" Bass said. He threw up his hands and tried to laugh.

"All right, we'll play a game. Gotten and Bloom acted on their own when they ambushed and robbed me. You don't know a thing about it, nor about my part of the gold dust that's probably in your safe right now." Jeff nodded toward the big iron box that stood against the wall, just back of Bass.

The speculator swung in his chair and looked at it, too, and managed to keep the appearance of bewilderment. "If you had trouble with Gotten and Bloom, they were on their own," he announced flatly. "I wouldn't know. I rode on ahead. I haven't seen 'em since they got in."

"That's a lie."

Bass's weighty body tightened again as Jeff came around the end of the counter. But it was too late for him to make a protest. In the seconds while his lower body had been cut from sight by the end of the pine-board counter, Jeff had pulled his gun. He stopped where the weapon could not be seen from the window, but it was lined on the center of the man's thick waist.

"Take it easy," Jeff warned. "All I want is a look at the gold dust you've got in there."

"You realize this has the earmarks of armed robbery, Farraday?"

"Never mind about that. Open the safe."

Bass considered for an instant, then rose from the chair. Hunkering at the safe door, he began to twirl the knob. Jeff watched closely, observing the combination and storing it in his mind. Bass swung open the heavy door.

In grim satisfaction, Jeff said, "That's just twice the amount of gold dust you received from Oren Fells. I'll take my half, Bass, right now."

"Your half?" Bass intoned. "You're making a mistake, Farraday. That's my dust and Sandra Noonan's. She gave me not only her share of the profits but a lot more, to invest in another drove of beef steers."

"That's another lie."

"Better be sure you can prove the gold is yours before you take it with a gun. It's mighty easy to start a lynching in this town."

JEFF stood there for a long moment, unable to concede that the man had him bested at the moment. He had no doubt that he and his neighbors owned half of that gold dust. Yet if he demanded it and took possession at the point of a gun, Bass could start a hue and cry that would produce a lynching before the real facts could be proved.

Bass read the defeat in the eyes he watched, and smiled. His features relaxed, and he was confident enough so that he swung over to his chair and reseated himself.

"Don't blame you for acting wild, I guess," he said then. "You lost the money you meant to take home to your neighbors. It must be hard on a man cut out like you. But that gun isn't the way to make amends."

"What is?"

"You can recover your losses and then some."

"How?"

"By getting off your high horse and stringing along with me."

"You, me and Sandra again?"

"I told you she's a big part of my plans."

"Then," Jeff said, "you might be interested in a message she sent. Instead of wanting to be your wife, she hopes you hang."

"I don't believe that."

"Then ask her. She ought to be in tomorrow on the stage."

A deep, arresting shock had entered Bass's countenance, wiping off its easiness. "You're bluffing," he breathed.

"Just wait and see."

Bass had his own bad moment, then, and his thinking registered on his face. If Sandra had thrown him over for a younger, more attractive man, she would disclaim ownership of any of that gold dust in the safe. Yet the solution to that was easy, and Jeff watched the man discover it for himself.

The excess gold dust would have to be removed and hidden elsewhere before the Lewiston stage got in. Otherwise it could entrap Bass and bring him face to face with a hangnoose, himself.

Bitterly, Bass said, "I knew she liked your looks. But you made more time with her than I figured."

"Want to square up with me now?"

Bass's gaze came up, burning with sudden hatred. "I'll square accounts with you, all right. For a moment I was sorry for you and wanted to save your face with your neighbors. But if you've been slandering me to Sandra, then I'll see you in hell."

"Look around when you get there," Jeff said, "but don't be too sure of finding me."

He swung, then, and walked out. His throat was gagging dry as he passed along the street, for he knew with cold precision what Bass would do. His jealousy over Sandra had moved him beyond the defensive desire to cover his tracks and keep possession of his ill-gotten treasure.

The man had only to remove all the gold dust in the safe, then report to the town marshal that Jeff Farraday had forced him to open it, in the guise of demanding an accounting, and had memorized the combination. Gotten, Bloom and Gandy Hames would swear they witnessed that, if necessary, out of the urgent need to protect themselves.

For a brief moment, Jeff felt a strong aversion ripple along his spine. His mind ran back to the night when he had seen the vigilantes preparing to hang a man in this very town. That was the jeopardy he now shared with Rhett Bass. Only the smarter, the stronger, of them, could escape it and live.

His own maneuver was as clear and simple as Bass's had been. The dust must not be allowed to leave the safe until Sandra was in town, and an accounting could be demanded under what passed locally for the law. He realized that he was gambling much on Sandra's willingness to back the man she had picked.

Yet he was only one of Bass's victims, and he had no other choice.

He crossed the street at the end of the block, wondering where he should station himself to keep watch on that office. He had determined while there that it had only the one entrance and the street windows, the building having been thrown up in haste like so many others, a small structure hemmed in by larger ones.

He received a shock of surprise when he looked back to see that the light within had been extinguished. When he saw a man emerge through the doorway, he took only time enough to be sure that nothing was being carried out. Then, pressed back into the slot between two buildings, he watched Bass hasten to the main street and there turn left and vanish beyond the corner.

He followed at once, beginning to perceive already that the man was going to muster his henchmen. This thinking crystalized when, rounding the corner himself, he saw Bass vanish into the archway of a livery. Jeff went on to the darkened front of a clothing store and stepped into the shadows of its spacious doorway.

In a matter of minutes Bass rode out of the livery archway. He carried nothing at all like the bulk the gold dust would make. He didn't even look Jeff's way as he rode on, heading down the river.

That meant that Hames had made his packer's camp down there.

For a second Jeff wondered if he were being subjected to another clever trap. Maybe Bass knew he was being watched and was leaving town, the gold dust left unguarded, in the hope that his enemy would decide it was a surer thing to take the treasure by stealth. Then Bass could loosen a hue and cry, knowing whom to seek and that his man would be found somewhere on the Yakima, delivering the dust to its rightful owners.

YET there had been a certain urgency in the way Bass moved, and Jeff's thoughts centered on that. All too late he realized what he might have done, without meaning to. Bass didn't have to run the risks of trying to get Jeff hanged by the vigilantes. He had only to keep Sandra from reaching Wallula. There would be a revengeful satisfaction in that for Bass, who then could laugh at his rival and make a final disposition of him at a safer time.

Even as he reached this decision, Jeff was on his way to the livery where he had put up his own horse. He was soon riding out of town in the direction Bass had taken.

The night was bitterly cold, a stiff river breeze disturbing it. When the lights of the town had fallen behind, his eyes adjusted to the darkness. For a time Bass had followed the Umatilla road. He still had not become visible when, some ten minutes later, Jeff saw the faint glimmer of a campfire. It was off to the right, and at such a place as Hames would pick to graze his packstring.

Pulling down his horse, Jeff considered what his own next move should be. It would be too dangerous to try to eavesdrop on the camp, and he was certain Bass had come out to order his hardcases into the saddle. It would be better to let the man return to town in a complacent frame of mind, believing that his henchmen would remove the main danger to him. Jeff pulled off the road, then, into a clump of river brush.

He had hardly more than five minutes to wait to see Bass ride past him, heading back to town. Yet Jeff's interest in him was brief. The man had passed the immediate action into the hands of Hames. Whatever it was to be, the packers were the ones to watch now.

They were only a few minutes behind Bass in coming along, the three of them riding abreast. They also were heading up the river, but Jeff would have bet much that they would take the Lewiston trail. He knew what would happen someplace out there, eastward in the wild sageland. The stages were being held up time after time, sometimes with the driver and all passengers left dead and silent.

Jeff did not fall in behind them until the blackness of the chilly night had swallowed them. He was gambling with the remote possibility that Bass was being smarter than he thought likely, had towed him out here deliberately where he could be waylaid and murdered. He kept his hand at ready on the grips of his gun.

When he had ridden close enough to the town to know they had passed up the best chance for that, he made his own leap in the dark, cutting on an angle across country for the Lewiston trail. The going was rough, but it was the only way he could get ahead of them and verify his supposition.

By the time he reached the second road he was chilled through, and his horse was badly worn. The rough thoroughfare ran along the Walla Walla River. He was certain Hames and party would stick to it, rather than exhaust their own mounts by trying to use more stealth. Thus, he was waiting in another clump of brush when all three of them came on and passed him.

He had never ridden the stage from Lewiston and had no idea of its schedule. But, in this weather and with the roads so bad, a time table would mean nothing. Hames knew that, too. He and his men would simply pick a good place to strike, then wait.

Jeff pondered that, and the great danger to the passengers, should something prevent him from interferring successfully. It was of no importance to let Bass's men incriminate themselves by trying to stick up the stage. He knew already that they were cold-blooded killers and, anyway, Bass would disown them completely if they got in trouble.

There was a better way, more dangerous to him yet safer for the stage passengers. That was to try to capture Bass's men and take them out of the picture, leaving Bass unwarned and unguarded when Sandra Noonan came in.

Again Jeff punished his horse harder than he would have under any other circumstances, turning it back away from the trail and once more striking across the rough country. Now he took advantage of the leisure with which Bass's men rode to meet the oncoming stage. When he judged himself to be well ahead of them, he cut back to the trail again.

A tight tension built up, along with the black anger that drove through him. These were the men who would have murdered him near Lewiston, who had brought off the rob-

bery for Bass at the expense of some mighty fine people. Jeff was seeing himself as only finishing that action, delayed but inexorable.

He came in where sagebrush and rock stood high above the trail. Swinging down, he walked to the head of his horse. His palm, pressed against its muzzle, would prevent it from whickering a greeting to its kind. He had his gun gripped tight and ready in his other hand. He could see them coming on at a jogging gait, apparently trusting to the complete serenity of the night.

THEY were not quite abreast of him when he called out. "Hold up, boys, and sit tight!"

He was where they could not hope to make a dash for it and get away. The necks of the horses arched upward as the animals were pulled to a swinging stop. The closest man, Gotten, shoved up his hands in haste. He was the most exposed and thus the most obedient. Next to him, Bloom sat his horse in motionless uncertainty. But, on beyond, Gandy Hames stabbed a hand for his gun.

Jeff wrote it off, then, knowing his luck had run out. Gotten swore bitterly at Hames, not liking to be used as a buffer. Jeff could not risk shooting the helpless man, who still had his hands in the air. But Gotten solved that by throwing himself out of the saddle just as Hames fired.

Hames reared back his horse, and it was Bloom who took Jeff's shot. But by then the man had plucked his gun and joined Hames in the contest. The weapon exploded in the air and Bloom fell. Hames swore, swinging low on his horse and shooting across its neck. The slug knocked Jeff's hat from his head. His horse, jerking backward, pulled him down.

He managed to hold onto the animal. But by the time he had clawed around in the snow, Hames was driving ahead. Floundering up, Jeff swung into the saddle. He took time only to start the two riderless horses traveling, then drove out in pursuit of Hames.

The man twisted in the saddle to fling an angry shot back at Jeff. His horse was far the fresher, and he trusted it to get him away. Jeff shot again, then again, watching the gap between them widen. In a moment Hames was too far away for effect.

Well, he won't try to stick up the stage himself, Jeff thought—not after this scare.

Bloom still lay in the snow when Jeff came back. Gotten had climbed to his feet, weighed his chances of escaping, then had waited, with no inclination to continue the fight by himself.

Jeff was bitterly disappointed that he had not managed to take all three men. He doubted that Hames possessed the courage to try to do away with Sandra without help, now that he knew something had gone wrong. But he would cut back to Wallula and report this to Bass, who would lose no time in taking other steps to protect himself.

The two riderless horses had wheeled off across the snow, then stopped, discouraged by the poor footing underneath. Jeff doubted that there was any chance of breaking Gotten down and getting him to talk to an officer of the law, which made it impractical to bother with him at the moment. He pointed across at the horses.

"Catch 'em and fetch your sidekick in, Gotten," he ordered "When you get to Wallula, make any kind of complaint against me you want to. But remember something. Rhett Bass is in a tight, and when it squeezes enough he's going to cross you the same as Hames did. I wouldn't stick my neck out too far for the man."

He took their weapons, then started back, this time riding the stage road. He felt slack and drained and knew that, while he probably had saved Sandra's life, he might have worsened matters considerably for himself. It would be hard to prove that he'd had cause to kill Bloom.

It was in the depths of the long winter night when he got back to Wallula. Although he had ridden the more jaded horse, he was sure he had beaten Hames, since he had ridden the more direct route. He put the black in the stable and, since the hosteler was in bed in the tackroom, rubbed it down himself. Patting its flank in thanks for its service, he emerged onto the street.

Bass's office, he had ascertained while coming into town, was still dark. Yet it had no sleeping accommodations, and Bass undoubtedly would be staying in the best hotel. Jeff went there, finding the lobby deserted. He had to leaf back in the register only one page

to find the speculator's name. The man was in room 14, which would be on this lower floor.

Jeff found the number easily and knocked on the door. He had to rap twice before Bass answered.

"Who is it?"

"Gandy," Jeff said, making his voice high and tight as if from excited urgency. "Rhett, open up. The plan jumped the track."

He felt a prickling in the nape of his neck as he heard footfalls beyond the door. When the panel swung in, he had his gun drawn.

"Easy, Bass," he said softly. "I wasn't lying. It sure did."

Bass made a noisy intake of breath. He seemed on the point of exploding into heedless action, then stepped backward as Jeff came in. Jeff noiselessly closed the door behind him.

"Get dressed," he ordered. "We're going down to your office and sit it out there."

IT WAS only a little after daylight when the Lewiston stage came in. Mud-spattered and creaking, it showed no signs of having had trouble. Jeff saw it wheel past the office window. He grinned at Bass.

"Looks like Sandra is still on it," he commented. "Pretty soon we'll see where her loyalty lies."

Bass's eyes seethed, but he said nothing. For the past three hours he had sat thus in his office chair. The gold dust was still in the safe. Sandra alone could say whether it got the man hung or turned the tables on his enemy. Bass felt little confidence.

As Jeff had expected, Sandra came at once to the office door. He let her in and was aware of the astonishment on her face as she stared at him, then slid her gaze to the cowed Bass. Maybe not until that moment did she make her final decision. Since she had sought Bass first, Jeff could only guess.

"So you got him," she breathed, looking at Jeff again. "Did you get your money?"

Bass knew from that question that she would not substantiate his claim that the excess fortune in his safe belonged to her. Maybe he saw her as Jeff did, throwing in decisively with the stronger, more capable man.

"Not yet," Jeff answered, "but he'll give it to me now."

"No, by heaven!" Bass roared.

He came out of the chair in a reckless surge, driving at Jeff. He knew that Bloom was dead, that Hames and Gotten had probably deserted him in his direst need. All through he had used other men to gain his ends. But it was all his problem now, his alone.

Jeff didn't use his gun. Instead, he cut back from Bass's drive, dancing aside. He drove a fist straight and hard into the man's belly. Bass gagged, swung, and got in one stiff blow before he went down to stay.

Jeff looked long at Sandra. The deeper stirrings within her would remain a mystery to him forever. But he was seeing her plainly as an adventuress whose interest and favors would belong always to the better man.

"If you really want it wound up," he breathed, "see if you can find the marshal."

She nodded and left, serene, with no lingering regret for the man who so recently had been her best bet.

It was midmorning when Jeff walked into the Little Gem.

Between meals, again, Mary was not too busy to talk with him.

"Bass coughed up the dust," he said. "The marshal picked up Hames and Gotten at the camp. I'm thinking you can quit your job now and come home with me. And I mean clear home, Mary. That's where I want you—on my ranch, as my wife."

Mary's eyes grew wide. "But—Sandra. I knew you could have her the first time I saw her look at you. What's the matter? Was she in it with Bass?"

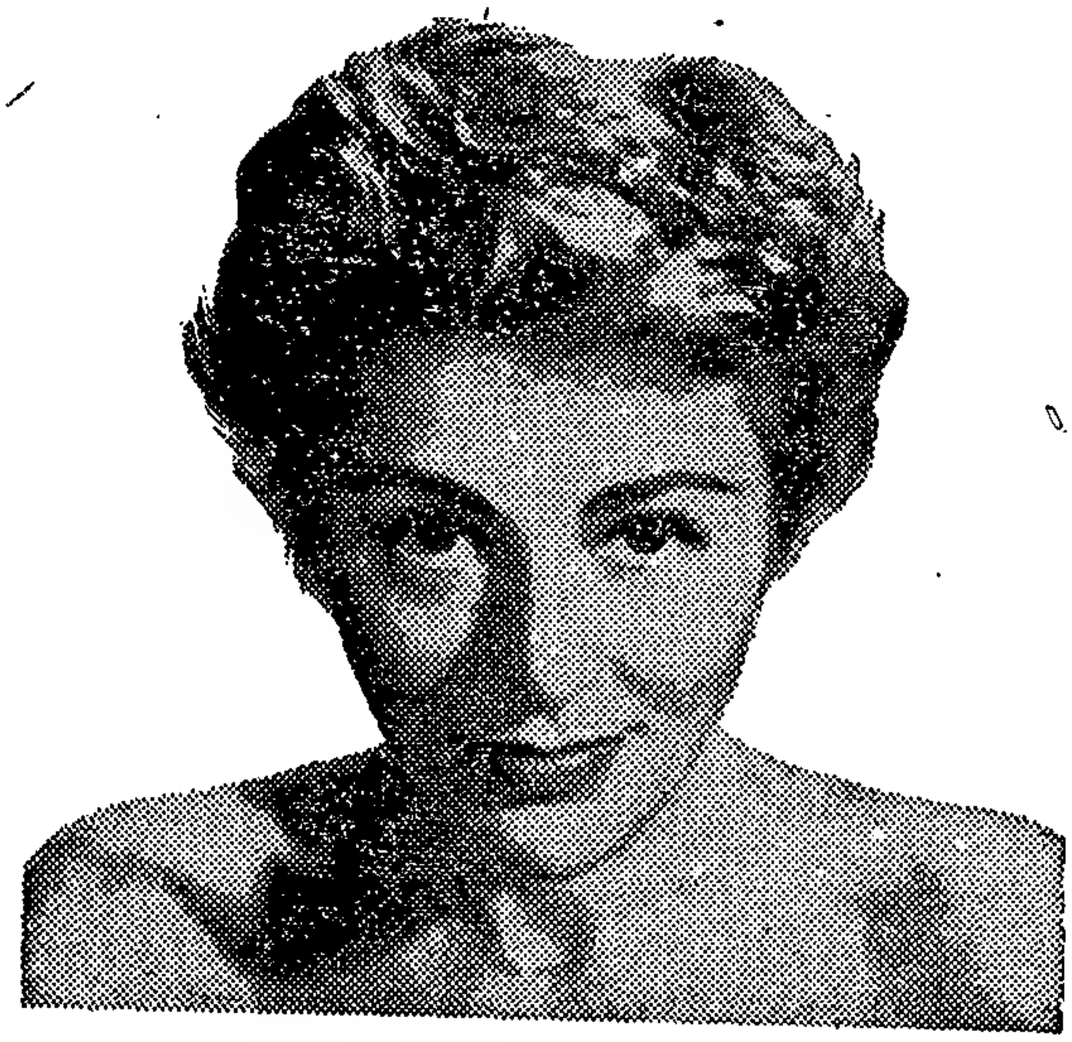
"No. It just happens you're the one I want, Mary."

It was wonderful to watch the brown face change, to see the deep, incredulous excitement that came into her fine brown eyes. "You mean you could have her but still want me?"

"What man would ever hesitate?"

That was what Mary needed, that triumph in the field where women competed for men. It brought to her features a loveliness such as Sandra would never possess. It brought to her arms and mouth, as she came to Jeff, a promise no Sandra could fulfill.

"All that is in this book is true."
— Lillian Roth



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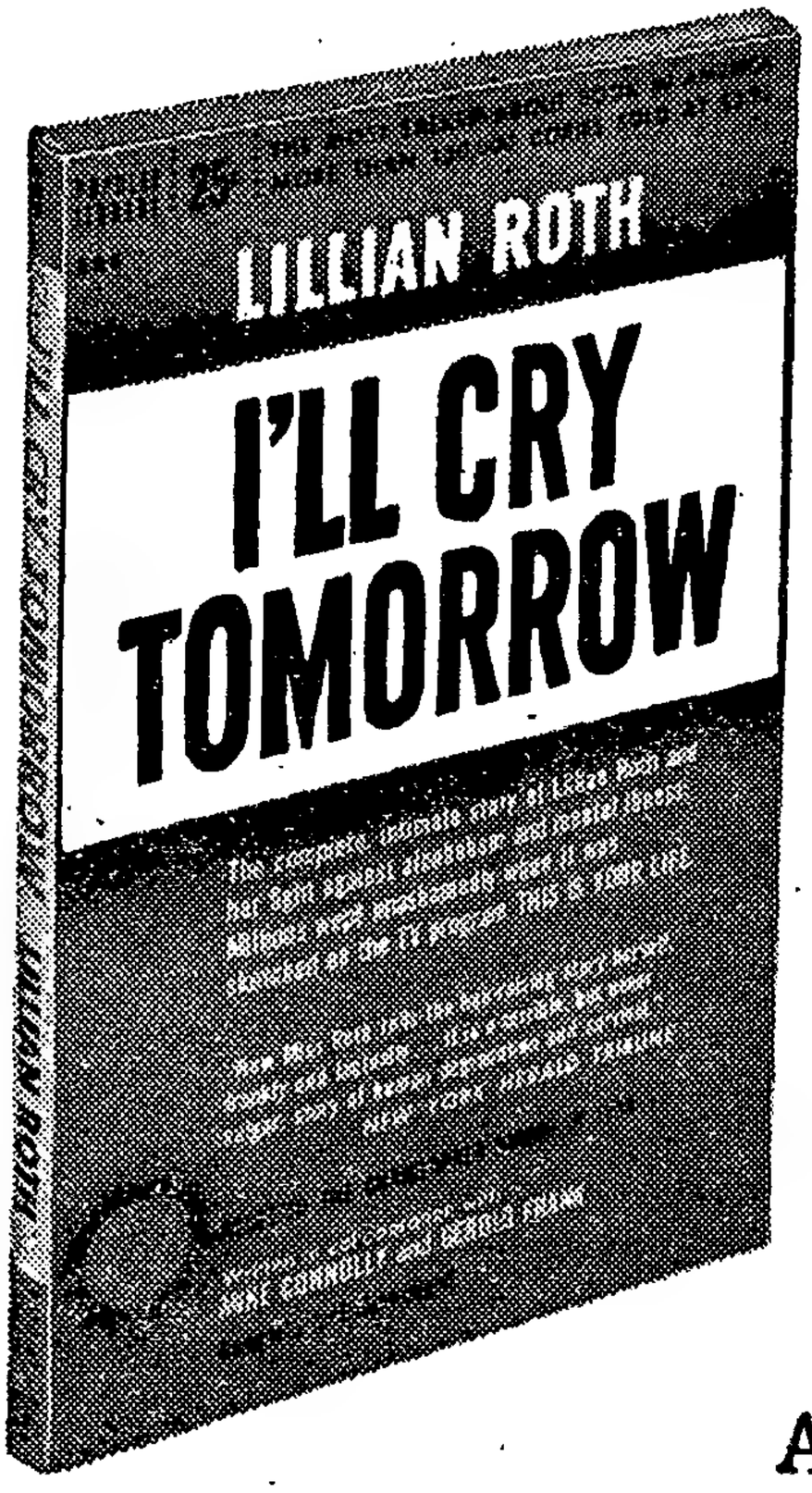

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CLIFF AUSTIN WAS OUT hunting a horsethief . . . and hiding behind a woman wasn't going to save the guilty party. . . .

HE HAD forded the creek five times on his way into the canyon. It was hot; flies and a myriad of insects buzzed in swarms, troubling his nervous horse, sticking and stinging in rivulets of sweat that streaked down Cliff Austin's sun-blackened neck.

He had reached Drowning Creek, shallow and glassy clear on its red sandstone bottom. It was tepid and bitter tasting, but horse and man drank anyway. Both Cliff and the buttermilk stallion knew a hard, throat-cracking thirst.

Austin rode with a caution that was out of accord with the bigness of the country. He kept reining the buttermilk away from the flat rocky washes, through sandy stretches where the willows and heavy growth of mesquite would cover him from all except the most careful scouting from the high places.

Late afternoon sun was lipping the canyon wall when he saw the camp. He was suspicious of it from the first; it was too quiet, and had a tenderfoot air about it that didn't jell with Cliff Austin's measure of horsethief Ike Cleemund and his long-rope crew.

Cliff edged his stallion far to the east of the first big rise, riding quietly, making his ascent in easy looping circles so the horse would have plenty of strength left for running if things got tough. From the top he could see a long lay of canyon floor, and could look down on the details of this strange camp.

He could not have had a better view if he had been the eagle that appeared now from some crag and swooped in a slow glide above the stream, hunting prey. It was a wall tent down there, siding a brush arbor lean-to. It had been there maybe a week, Cliff guessed; there were still wilted green leaves on the arbor brush.

Those leaves hung motionless, not a faint stir of breeze relieving the dry locust clatter. Cliff moved muscular shoulders inside the sweat-stained wetness of his shirt, thinking of heat, bugs, and crawling varmints. Then something moved down there.

There was a sharp glint of sun on her hair as the girl stepped into the clearing from a long-abandoned road. She ran a hand along the nape of her neck, lifting the long hair, shaking it loosely as if seeking relief from the oppressive heat. Her face turned directly toward him.

A Dangerous

Near the creek she stopped, and removed her shoes and stockings

Place to Camp

By BILL BURCHARDT

Cliff had a strong sense of being seen, then knew he had not been, as she turned away to cross the sandy bar.

At the creek edge she stopped and removed shoes and stockings. Holding her skirt high, she waded out. As the sun caught the whiteness of her legs and ankles, Cliff Austin felt his face turn hot and stinging. He squirmed, feeling the miserableness of his spying. Then another figure came from under the brush arbor.

This one was an older woman, in faded shapeless linsey. She paused to call, "Mattie!"

The voice came sharply to the rise through the afternoon quiet. The older woman took an ax and began to whack kindling from a heap of blackjack firewood.

"Yes, mother," answered the girl in the stream.

"Your father will be coming. Time to start cooking supper."

The girl left the stream, and all sound faded, except for the running of water. Cliff noticed that it had an oddly different sound than before. He frowned; then a sharp alertness spread through him. He stood upright with a sudden disregard for being seen.

The sound was not coming from the stream here. It was somewhere farther upstream. He saw it then, and made an immediate decision. He grabbed his reins, and the buttermilk was sliding sideways down the talus-littered slope almost before he could get a good fork on the saddle.

THESE women, isolated here, could not know of the gully-washing rains that had hit the high plains to the north, only yesterday. Cliff did; he had ridden through a part of them. He caught a glimpse of it now, a five-foot wall of water tumbling against the torturous wall of the stream cut. Cliff knew that in a moment the quiet camp by the creek edge would be a part of the torrent of logs, debris and drift rushing on the crest of that rise of water.

His horse ripped through timber, and brush and limbs clawed at his upraised arm. The stallion burst out on the abandoned road then, and Cliff fought the frantic animal, seeking direction, then plunged toward the camp.

He sighted the tent just as the two women heard the coming rise of water. He saw them straighten near the fire, and stare transfixed at the awesome thing bearing down on them. Cliff did not slow the plunging horse, but thundered between them, scattering the brands and embers of the campfire, hauling the stallion to an abrupt stop as the torrent hit.

Cliff reached to sieze the woman, and yelled at the girl, "Grab the saddle horn!"

But his fingers were short of their yearning reach, and he saw the older woman tumble in the flood swirl as he dived from the saddle, caught human flesh, and hung on. The stallion was in swimming water now, and Cliff yelled.

He heard the horse grunt at the cold bite of the flood water. Coming close, Cliff shoved the woman against the saddle and was about to kick himself away, when he saw the white startled face of the girl staring at him from across the saddle.

After the oppressive heat, the cold torrent of water was refreshing, and as the first shock passed the depth fell quickly, here among the trees at the stream's bank. Cliff grinned at the wide-eyed girl who floated across from him.

He wrapped an arm around the trunk of a willow. "Put your feet down," he said to the girl. "You can touch bottom here."

The stallion washed on with the current across the flooded low ground, with the older woman still clinging to a saddle skirt. Cliff Austin stood on the sandy bottom, brushing water from his hair and eyes, and grinning at the girl, who let him hold her arm now while she got a better grip on the willow trunk to steady herself against the driving swirl of creek water.

Her shoulders were quivering from the shock of cold water and violent excitement.

"Where's our camp?" she asked, shivering.

"Well, it *was* about a quarter-mile back," Cliff said. "No telling where it is now."

"Do you mean the current has carried us a quarter of a mile?"

Cliff glanced across the broad spread of lowlands, flooded waist deep as the crest flowed on. "These raises hit pretty hard," he said, still bracing against the swift water.

"We could have drowned," she said. Then,

in sharp alarm, she cried, "Where's mother?"

Cliff pointed to his horse, stopped near the edge of the flood, with a wet, bedraggled figure still clinging to the saddle skirt. He took the girl's arm and began a slow walk through the muddy current.

He had helped Mattie and her mother to high ground, not far from where he had hidden to watch the camp, when he became aware of more activity down below. A lone man was riding his horse frantically into the belly-deep water. The girl, busy comforting her tired and frightened mother, did not notice.

Cliff shouted, "Hey, down there!"

Mattie looked up. "It's Daddy!"

The noise of tumbling water covered their shouts as the lone man left his horse, floundering on foot through the water where the camp had been. Cliff left the women and rode down.

Through the long shadows of near sundown the breeze he stirred felt cool on his wet clothes. Making his explanation as brief as possible, Cliff guided the man to the crest where his womenfolks waited, and then built a fire. With the sun below the canyon wall, evening chill sprang up fast.

Cliff unrolled his tarp to dry his bedroll, and salvaged jerky and wet coffee to take the edge off their hunger. Across the fire then, he eyed the short, thick-chested, bearded man—Mattie's father—who had introduced himself as Asa Ben Terhune.

"Glad you were around," commented the short man.

Cliff knew some explanation of how he happened to be so handy to the scene would fit in here, but he only said, "Un-huh. That's a dangerous place to camp down there."

ASA TERHUNE offered no explanation either of how he happened to make camp where anyone who knew this country might expect a sudden rise. Instead, he asked, "You heading any place in particular?"

Cliff glanced at the cloudy night sky. "Just riding," he evaded. "Those clouds up there are building up. If we get much rain, that water'll come higher."

He threw a chunk of greasewood on the fire, then went on, "Come morning, I'll help you hunt your stuff. If it doesn't rain, the water will go down pretty quick. Most of your stuff will be caught in the brush down there in the flat."

He left his bedding for the women to use. Some distance from camp, he kicked aside enough pebbles and rocks to lie down, and spent an uncomfortable night there. The next morning Cliff helped Asa Terhune prowl the willow and mesquite flats. They found Asa's mud-caked tent, a grub box containing as much river sand as grub, soaked dirty bedding, and broken cots.

It was a sorry sight when it was all stacked together on the hill. The Terhune family pitched in to make the best of bad luck. Asa Terhune and Cliff had been separated most of the morning hunting camp gear. Now, as they worked together pitching the wall-tent, Cliff kept wondering whether this short, taciturn man was strange to this country. He decided to try a shot in the dark.

"You ever hear of Ike Cleemund?"

Asa Terhune rose as suddenly as if a prickly pear had stuck him. The beard hid his mouth, but Cliff could see the glaze of caution in Terhune's eyes.

"I've heard of him," he said shortly.

Cliff drove in another tent peg. "Fellow back in Wildorado told me an outfit using a Morning Sun brand was running some horses in here."

Terhune's lips barely moved. "That's right."

With the stakes down, Cliff stretched out the tent fly, holding it taut as he waited for Terhune to lash it down. The black bearded stern-faced Terhune leaned to grab the rope.

Cliff asked, "You settling here?"

Asa Terhune answered noncommittally. "For a while."

The idea built higher in Cliff's mind. He considered asking directly, then tried one more hedging question. "You mean you don't aim to stay here permanently?"

Mrs. Terhune, querulous after an unrestful night, said acidly, "I hope not!"

That cinched it for Cliff Austin. This is a mighty clever scheme, he decided. Ike Cleemund sends this man in here to scout Morning Sun horse herds. With Terhune bringing his family, who would suspect him, or figure

that he was anything but a drifting squatter looking for a homestead? Then when Cleemund drives through toward the border, he cleans the canyon of the horses Terhune has stolen, and makes a real profitable gather.

Having made up his mind about Terhune, Cliff hastily formed a plan that would let him stay around long enough to get his hands on Ike Cleemund. He said, "I wasn't sure at first, but I reckon you're the man I was supposed to meet. I signed on with Ike right after he sent you in here. Ike and the boys'll be through in a couple of days, and he says the more stuff we have bunched the quicker he can get out. We'll try to cut out the culls, and have the top stuff ready to throw in with the herd Ike is driving to Mexico."

Asa Terhune had a white-knuckled grip on the hatchet he was using to drive the tent-fly pegs. He stared at the ground with his usual fixed tacturnity.

That afternoon they started bunching Morning Sun horses. This was some of the best breeding stock Cliff Austin had ever seen. There were no culls. They were chestnuts, sorrels, or blacks, all solid colors, standing fifteen hands and better, short coupled and deep chester. Cliff and Terhune combed them from the flats along Drowning Creek, busting through mesquite and huisache thickets so tangled you couldn't see the ground you rode.

It was hot sweaty work, but Cliff enjoyed it. He had been too busy to worry much about Cleemund's arrival until he spotted the sign of a sizable horse herd two days later, horses he knew he and Asa had not driven.

Cliff sat his buttermilk stallion thoughtfully awhile, then said, "Might be best, Mr. Terhune, if we just pick up our gather, then follow along this trail. Then when we catch up with Ike, there won't be any problem of coming back to pick up these Morning Sun brands."

Asa Terhune scrutinized Cliff from under bushy brows, nodded shortly, and reined off toward the rocky blind draw where they were holding their gather. Cliff pulled his handkerchief up over his nose when the dust began to fog as they broke the Morning Sun horses from the rocks, hazing them south. He was still wearing the handkerchief when they got into the second dust cloud, and he knew they were catching up with Ike Cleemund's horsethief outfit.

CLIFF concluded it might be just as well to leave that bandanna in place until Asa Terhune broke the ice with Cleemund. There were sixty-eight horses in the Morning Sun bunch, any of which would bring close to a hundred dollars. Cliff figured the sight of six thousand dollars—gratis—with Ike Cleemund having to do nothing at all to get it, might please the big outlaw enough to keep questions scarce.

Cliff was scared now, but in the back of his mind was a strong hope that he might be able to pull off his bluff. He got a slight shock when he saw what Cleemund's outfit was doing. The outlaws' herd of stolen horses was heading into Drowning Creek. The dust cloud fell apart, disappearing toward the canyon wall, as Cleemund's herd went hock deep into Drowning Creek to allay the thirst of the day's dusty trail.

Cleemund's outlaws were making camp in almost the identical place where the Terhune camp had stood when Cliff rode into the canyon. The flood water had subsided during the past two days and Drowning Creek was as peaceful a stream as it had been when Cliff first saw it.

Cleemund, a slab of man with a week's rusty whiskers covering heat-reddened jaws, walked to the edge of camp as the Morning Sun herd came thundering in. There were six outlaws siding him, including a big man that Cliff abruptly remembered.

Every one was armed, and as Cliff Austin saw all that hardware he wondered uncertainly if he hadn't ought to forget his scheme and take off for the brush. But they were already in camp now, and the Morning Sun horses were heading for water, mingling with the fifty-odd CA branded horses already in the stream.

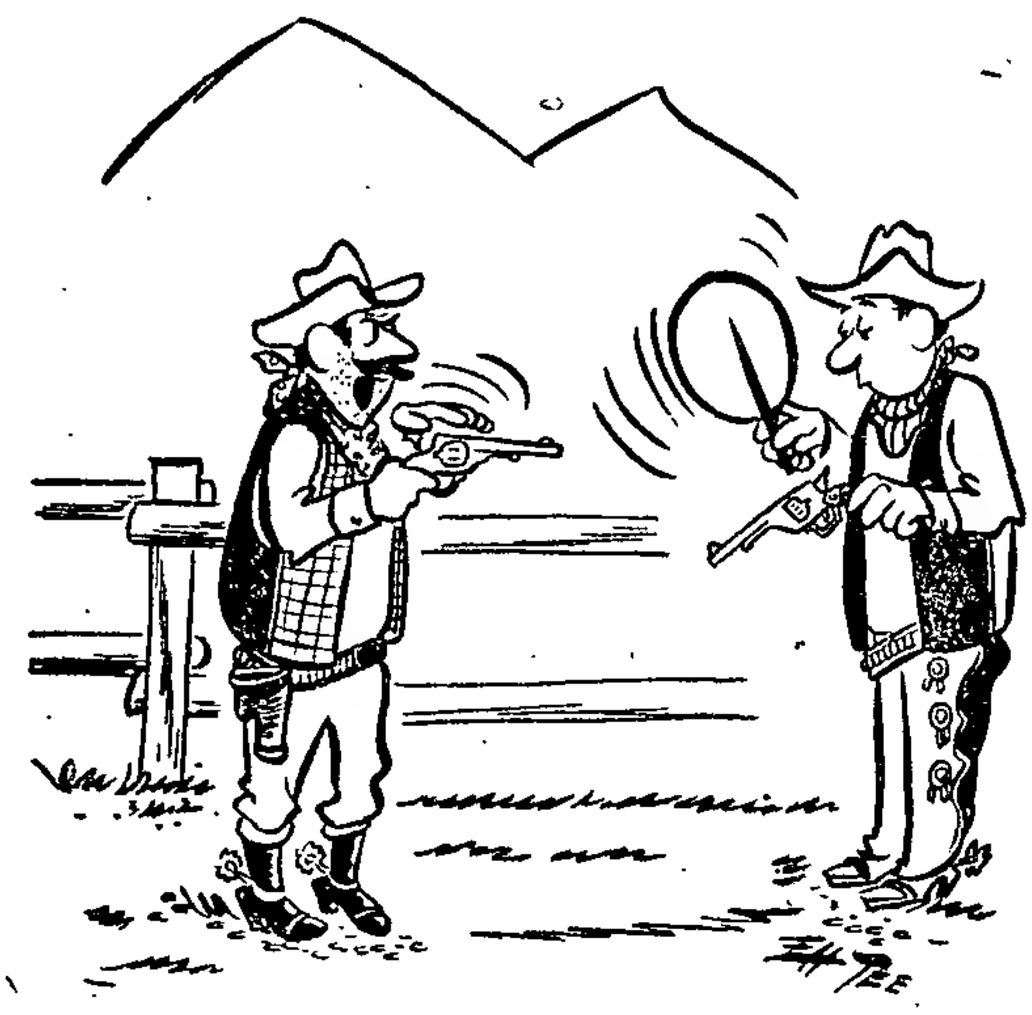
Asa Terhune and Cliff pulled up facing Cleemund's crew, and nobody spoke. Cleemund's owlhoots stared curiously. Asa Terhune and Cliff Austin stared back, then twisted in their saddles to stare at each other. It was awfully quiet, and Cliff could see clawed hands getting ready to unlimber .45's.

Asa Terhune asked flatly, "Are you Ike Cleemund?"

Cliff felt color drain from his face under the bandanna and his guts turned to water as Cleemund said, "Who the hell are *you,* and what do you want?"

Asa Terhune was glaring at Cliff now. Terhune pointed a calloused thumb at Cliff and said thinly, "I understood from your hired hand here that you wanted these horses."

Ike Cleemund swiveled to survey the Morning Sun stock in the river. He scowled at



"Ya fan a gun like this, tenderfoot!"

Cliff, and ordered, "Pull down that bandanna."

Cliff did.

Cleemund's grin was a bare-toothed snarl. "This is mighty nice," he said, "but I never saw either one of you before."

The big man said, "Cleemund, that young fellow there is the one you took all these CA horses from, up by Pampa. I saw him when you had me go ask him if he'd give me a job."

Asa Terhune hawked carefully and spat on the ground.

Cleemund's snarl turned into a belly laugh. "You're covered," he said unnecessarily. Cliff had already counted two Winchesters and four Colt's .45's aimed at them. Cleemund ordered, "Get off your horses. Emile, tie these yahoos under the wagon while I decide what to do."

Asa Terhune, glancing across the peaceable trickle of Drowning Creek, said, "Cleemund, if I'm going to be tied up under that wagon, I expect you ought to be warned that this is a dangerous place to camp."

Ike Cleemund's huge belly laugh echoed off the far wall of the canyon. "Dangerous? For who?"

Flung under the chuck wagon and tied to its wheels, Asa Terhune's glare at Cliff was hot. "Young man," he said, "just what was in your mind?"

"I figured you wrong, I guess, Mr. Terhune. I've been bird-dogging Cleemund ever since he raided me up by Pampa. I came on ahead into the canyon here, figuring I might find a place to start a stampede and maybe get some of my horses back. If that hadn't worked I meant to follow him, hoping I might come onto a Ranger company somewhere between here and El Paso."

TERHUNE cut in, "Then you jumped to the conclusion I was scouting for Cleemund!"

"Well, you let me think that," Cliff defended. "What was in *your* mind?"

"Austin, I own those Morning Sun horses out there."

"But your wife said you weren't settling here."

Terhune said, "She doesn't want to! This is a rough place for a woman. I promised her we might live in some nearby town and I'd graze the stock here. You told me Cleemund's horsethieves were coming and you were one of them. I knew I couldn't tackle them alone. Since I couldn't whip him, I decided to keep my mouth shut and join him for the time being."

"Looks like we thought alike, Mr. Terhune," Cliff said mournfully. This was dead serious; Cliff thought of Mrs. Terhune, and Mattie, wondering if he'd ever see her again, wondering if she'd ever see her father again. Cliff blamed himself. If he'd just warned Terhune, instead of selfishly trying to get his own stuff back—he lay pensively silent, listening to Terhune's impatient chaffing against his ropes.

As dusk came on, Cleemund's outlaws fell to bickering about who would mount night guard. The fools, Cliff thought, these horses will be easy to hold here. The argument settled on a gaunt, middle-aged rider named Gregg and one called Bucktooth, after some odd-man-out coin tossing. Cliff watched this pair rig a rope corral from tree to tree to hold the horses.

Ike Cleemund himself came to check on Cliff and Asa Terhune before he turned in. Cliff figured they'd wind up in the first convenient gully after the crew started moving again. Then the camp grew silent.

Suddenly Cliff's half-dozing picture focused sharply. Before the flood, an ax had been buried in a stump by the chuck wagon. Cliff stretched full length against the ropes and gouged the sand off the top of the stump with a boot heel. The ax was there, covered with a couple of inches of sand wash from the flood.

Cliff caught the ax handle with his foot and toed it cautiously toward him. Cliff worked the ax around, wedging it under the iron wheel rim, and sawed away.

His hands freed at last, Cliff crawled from under the wagon. He decided to take no chances with Gregg and Bucktooth, and wriggled flat on his belly to the rope corral.

Cliff could hear the horses grunt and snort, apprehensively nervous. He felt around the rope to the first hondo, slipped the knot, and used the loose rope end to flail the rump of a near horse. The startled animal neighed loud and broke for the center of the milling herd. Cliff yelled, and the stampede was on.

Cleemund's man jumped up, and the red-whiskered outlaw cursed wildly. Cliff could hear Bucktooth shout something about a timber wolf spooking them.

Somewhere off in the dark Gregg yelled that the horses wouldn't run far in this canyon. Then the whole crew mounted and chased off. Cliff shinnied up into the low branches of the big willow by the chuck wagon.

He was looking for a hand hold to climb higher when he saw eyes staring down from the crotch above him. His first thought was that it might be a mountain lion, but he knew that was unlikely, right here in camp. Those horses wouldn't have stood still if there were a lion near camp.

SUDDENLY, Asa Terhune's voice sounded from the tree branches, and Cliff realized that the bright eyes staring at him were the old man's. "You could have shoved that ax a little closer. I almost threw my back out of joint reaching it."

Cliff said, "Mr. Terhune, it's uncanny how much we think alike."

"Not always," Terhune said. "I remembered something you forgot. What did you aim to do when they came back, say boo to them? I have our guns. I found them where they left them, in the chuck wagon."

It was well over an hour before they heard the sound of returning horses. Cliff and Asa Terhune waited until the regathered horses were secured, and the horsethief crew came back into camp.

Cleemund said, "Somebody look at those two yahoos under the wagon."

"You'll have to look up here," Asa Terhune said quietly from his willow perch. "Unbuckle your belts. Cliff Austin will keep you covered while I pick up your guns."

Cliff waited until Terhune had stacked all the hardware. Then he climbed down. "Mr. Terhune tried to tell you fellows this was a dangerous place to camp," he chided.

They turned the horse herd loose. It took all the corral ropes to tie Ike Cleemund's outlaws on their horses and rope them together in one procession. With Asa Terhune pulling the lead rope and Cliff close-herding the rear, they wound up past the Terhune's higher camp, on the way out of the canyon.

Mattie Terhune, Cliff decided, was sure a pretty sight standing there by the tent in the light of a rising moon. Her hair was loose about her shoulders, and she was hugging her nightgown tight against the damp night chill.

"We'll take this bunch on to the sheriff at Wildorado," Terhune told his wife. "You and Mattie stay up here on this high ground. Can't tell when another rise might wash down that creek."

Asa and Cliff were thinking alike again then, for they added together, in the same cautioning voice, "Yeah, that sure is a dangerous place to camp, down there!"

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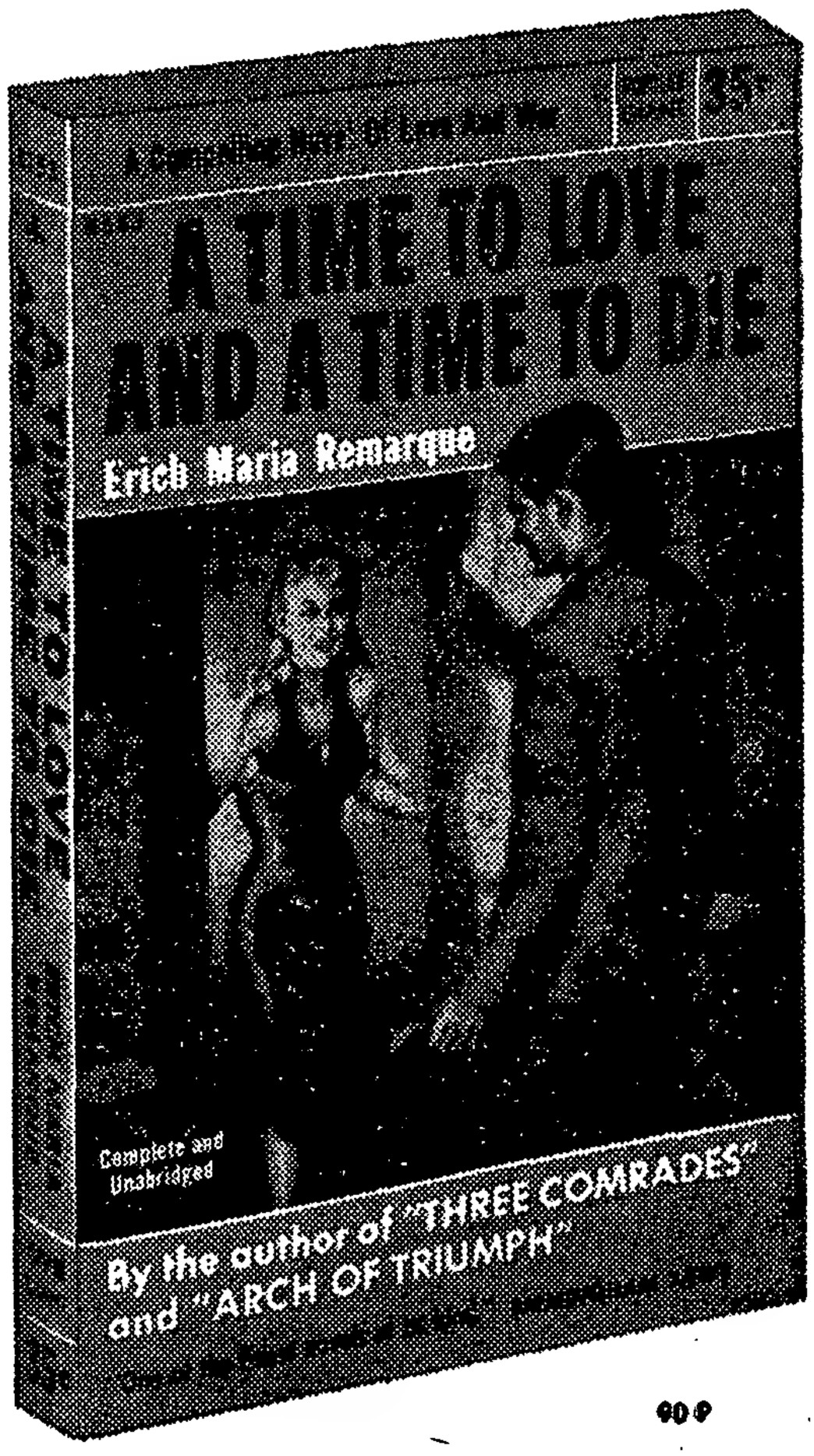
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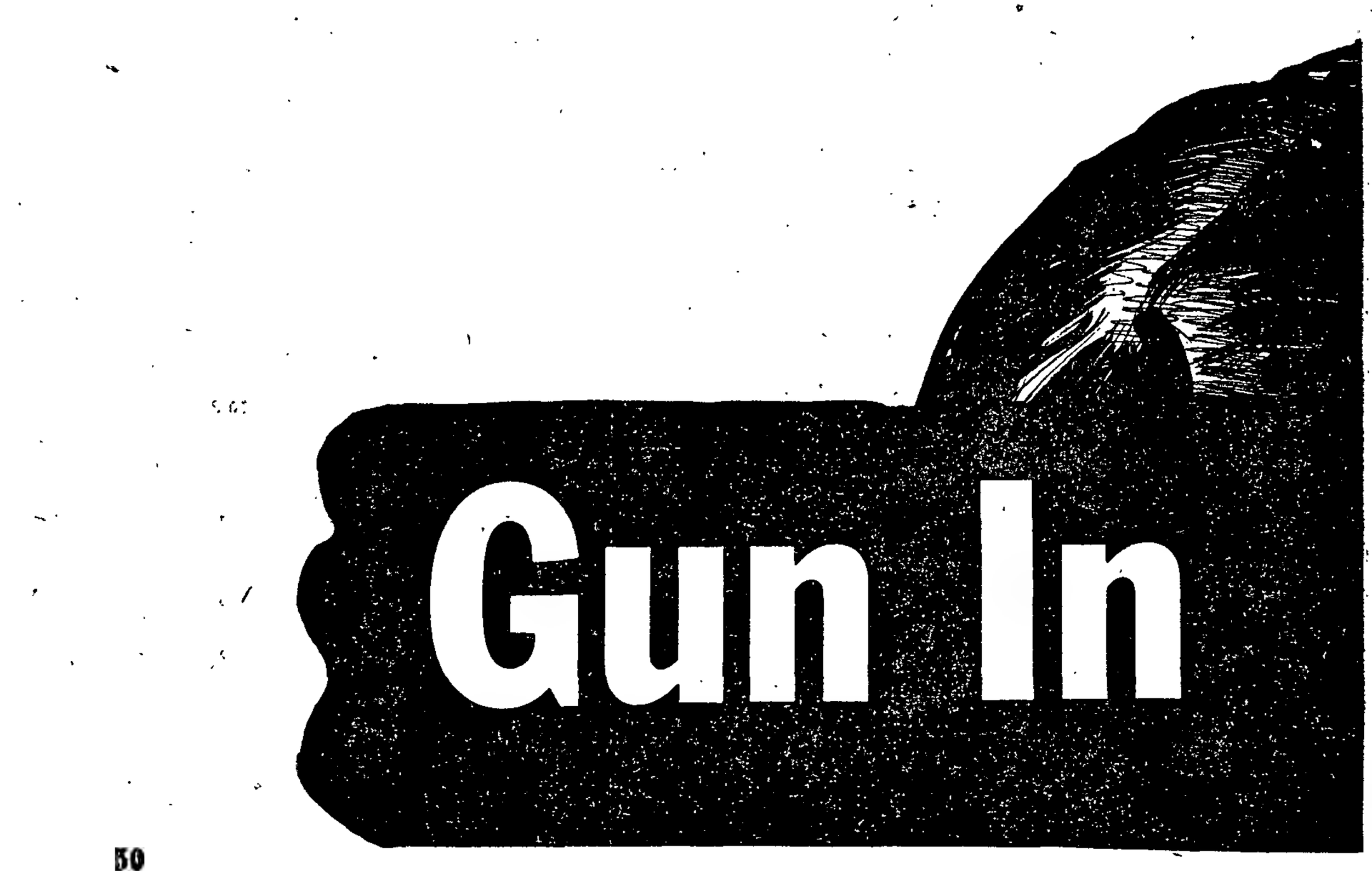
WILL VANCE WAS SET on holding his land, but he didn't know

he'd have to fight his own partner . . . or fight off his partner's wife



PART ONE

WILL VANCE awoke that morning with the feeling that something was wrong. He could put no mental finger on anything definite, but his uneasiness persisted even now as he said, "So long, *amigo*," to Mario Verdugo, his hired hand, and drove from Spur headquarters in his buckboard drawn by a pair of frisky little Spanish mules.

One of a hundred things could be wrong. Man was born to trouble, it was said, and one who ranched deep in the Big Bend of Texas could count on more than his fair share of grief. Yesterday he'd had a run-in with a Mexican *hidalgo* who had trespassed on Spur range. But today?

Vance could think of no more pressing problem than this trip he must make outside. It was a small thing, really; a long drive, nothing more. But life itself, here in the Big Bend, was one long uncertainty studded with pitfalls.

His Hand

by JACK BARTON

The land itself was hostile. It stretched away from Vance's adobe buildings in an awesome ruggedness unchanged from prehistoric times, full of craggy mountains, forbidding deserts, impenetrable canyons, hazy distances. Puny man had made no mark upon it, except in a few isolated spots such as at Spur Ranch headquarters.

Man had brought in his cattle and his half-tamed horses, but there were still mountain sheep on the rimrock, bears in the manzanito thickets, javelinos in the hills, deer in the canebrakes down by the Rio Grande, and *manadas* of mustangs everywhere.

Vance had adapted himself to the country as well as a man was able, meeting its challenge with a ruggedness of his own. He was a big-boned, hard-muscled man of thirty. His hair was a faded yellow, his eyes were the dull gray of cartridge lead, and squinted small from constantly peering far off. His mouth was humorless, for here nothing was amusing, and there were no women to smile upon. Vance's face was angular, rough-hewn, weathered a deep bronze.

Here in the wilderness, his world consisted of cattle and horses and grass and water. His problems were those made for him by other men who rode the country, some with the predatory instincts of wild animals and all with the awareness that law and order, except for the infrequent visits of Texas Rangers, was hundreds of miles away.

At Vance's back, as he drove north, reared the ramparts of the Chisos Mountains. To his right, and much closer, were the Frio Hills. Beyond the Frios lay the empire of one John Belden, and Vance, when his mind turned to Belden, thought, maybe that's the answer.

It was possible that his queasy feeling today was a fear that, while he was on his trip, John Belden, a lobo wolf of a man, might send his riders to seize Spur, on the theory that possession was nine points of the law.

The land was all but endless, and still Belden coveted Spur—not merely to add more range to his own vast Bell Ranch, but because there was on Spur a never-failing water supply. Water was the most precious commodity in the Big Bend. Because of its scarcity, men fought and died over it.

On his range was a big rock-bound waterhole called Barquino Spring. That was what John Belden really wanted, and had more than once tried to get. In time of drought, such as now, Belden sat in his great ranchhouse and tried to think up ways to get Will Vance off Spur.

Only one thing stayed the old man's hand, and that was Vance's once having told him, "If you try to steal Spur, I'll kill you. So help me!"

It had been a threat made in grim earnest, but it might not hold Belden forever. So the possibility that the man would move onto Spur while he was away, might, Vance decided, explain his feeling that something was going to go wrong.

He realized that he was borrowing trouble, and so, with a mental shrug, tried to shake off his uneasiness. He rein-slapped the little mules from a trot into a run, and rolled on across the harsh land that was Spur range.

Late in the morning, Vance drove through the craggy Frios by way of a narrow pass, and then turned onto the dusty trace of a road. The hills were John Belden's western drift fence, his western boundary line; so when traveling the road here Vance was, in a sense, trespassing upon Belden's property.

The man's range was an immensity of space, and Vance would not have hazarded a guess as to how many cattle dotted its grama grass flats and mesquite thickets. He did know that Belden had bought out more than fifty small ranchers when he came into the country two years ago.

At noon Vance followed the road around the base of some towering bluffs, and saw Estrella ahead. Estrella was what passed for a town here in the back country. It consisted of a handful of adobe buildings, squat and ugly. George Worden's combination general store and saloon occupied the largest building. Here in the middle of nowhere, Worden did a brisk business with people coming from as far as a hundred miles to trade. Today appeared to be one of the merchant's busy days. An ox-drawn *carreta* was pulling away from the store, and the hitch-rack was lined with saddle horses.

Vance halted his team alongside the building, tying the mules to a cottonwood stump.

When he reached the roofed gallery extending along the front of the place, he saw among the animals at the rack a fine black stallion rigged with a silver-decorated saddle and bridle.

The black bore on its right shoulder one of those spidery Mexican brands. It was familiar. It belonged to the Mexican with whom Vance had had trouble yesterday, a young dandy who claimed to be Don Luis Jaime Baca y Aragon. Sight of the stallion caused Vance to frown. His frown deepened when he noticed that some of the other horses wore John Belden's Bell iron.

His thought was that here was trouble waiting for him, that he should get back into his rig and drive on, fast. But he was out of tobacco, and a stubborn streak in his nature wouldn't let him leave without obtaining what he'd stopped to buy. He turned to the entrance of the store.

He paused just inside the doorway, momentarily blinded in the dimness after the brassy glare of sunlight. He heard a woman's melodious laughter and the deeper tones of George Worden's voice, then his vision sharpened and he saw the girl perched atop a barrel amid the orderly litter of merchandise. It was John Belden's daughter, Kate.

SHE was a tall, handsome girl with a wealth of auburn hair and a rather brazen manner. She wore riding attire: a divided skirt, a mannish shirt, half-boots. Vance had seen her perhaps a half-dozen times, always dressed like this. He'd seen her sit a horse; she could ride with men.

She was not like any woman Vance had ever known, and each time, upon seeing her, he had wondered what she was really like. Her gaze was on him now, in a speculative way. She was no longer laughing. Whatever witty thing George Worden had said was now forgotten. Worden himself seemed forgotten. She watched Vance with a lively interest.

And finally she said, "Well, hello!"

Vance said, "Hello, there," and walked to the counter where Worden kept his stock of smoking supplies in a glass case. He nodded to the merchant. "Give me a sack of Bull Durham, George, and some papers."

Worden laid a sack of tobacco and a packet of papers atop the case, saying, "I've just gotten in a fresh shipment of Mexican cigars, Mr. Vance."

"All right. Let me have a dozen of them, too."

"Certainly, Mr. Vance."

He was always this polite, no matter how small the sale. Never did he call a customer by his first name. George Worden woud never really become a part of the country; he was too unbending, too aloof. He'd come to Estrella two years ago, taking over the business from a man named Greer who had gone bankrupt. Where Greer had failed, Worden had succeeded, was prospering. He was a big-town man from St. Louis. It was to his credit that he was a success in a place where he would always be a stranger.

Worden counted out the cigars, added a small handful of matches. "That will be seventy cents, please. Another hot day, Mr. Vance. And no sign of rain."

Vance counted out the money. "There's never any rain, George."

Worden picked up the coins. "I don't suppose that worries you as it does most of the ranchers. I understand that you always have water."

Vance pocketed his purchases, except for one thin black cigar. He struck a match with a thumbnail, puffed the cigar alight. Then he said, "It worries me. If it doesn't rain before long, there'll be no grass one of these days—and without grass, my waterhole won't keep my cattle alive."

"Still, a lot of ranchers would give plenty to have a water supply like yours," Worden said. "I've heard some say so."

Vance smiled. He knew that Worden had heard John Belden say something like that. It was no secret that the merchant was a welcome visitor at Bell Ranch. Gossip had it that old Belden looked with favor upon him as a possible son-in-law. Puffing on his cigar, Vance wondered what Kate thought of Worden's chances. Possibly she considered them good. Except for his indoor pallor, the man was personable. He was glaringly a gentleman. About Vance's age, he was still not so set in his bachelor's ways that a clever woman couldn't manage him.

On the other hand, Vance wondered it

Worden were man enough to take the bit into his own teeth when the need arose. It was possible that Kate Belden, as high-spirited as a thoroughbred, might require a bit of taming, and Worden, with his mild ways, didn't appear to be one to keep a firm grip on the reins.

His thoughts running in that vein, Vance said tardily, "I've heard some talk like that, too, George," and turned away.

It again occurred to him that he should leave this place without encountering either the proddy Luis Aragon or the Bell riders, but his stubborn streak turned him not toward the door he'd entered but toward that connecting the store with the barroom. This took him past the Belden girl.

She said casually, "Sort of duded up, aren't you, Vance?"

He halted, removed the cigar from his mouth. He was wearing his gray broadcloth suit—the one he'd bought on his last trip outside to San Antonio—a white shirt with a maroon string tie, his best hat and boots.

"A little duded up," he said, detecting a sort of challenge in her manner. They'd never before held a conversation.

She said, "You look real handsome."

"Thanks."

"I'm wondering why you're duded up."

"It's bad manners, Miss Belden to let your curiosity show."

"I'm noted for my bad manners. Why are you wearing your Sunday duds?"

"I could be going on a little trip."

"Outside?"

"Maybe."

"How far?"

"I haven't been to Valido for some time."

Her eyes were mischievous. "Valido—that could mean you're going to see a woman."

"It could, I suppose."

"Getting information out of you is like pulling teeth."

"At any rate, I haven't said what occurs to me."

"What's that?"

"That what you're asking me is none of your business."

She laughed. "I like you, Vance. You're the only man who dares show a rough tongue to me." She wrinkled her nose. "Does that cigar George sold you taste as foul as it smells?"

He held it out to her. "It's yours to try."

THEIR eyes met and locked. Then Kate, laughing again, accepted the dare. She took the cigar and with no hesitation placed it between her strong white teeth. She puffed on it without strangling on the smoke, as Vance had expected, but making a face as though it did indeed taste foul. George Worden came from behind the counter, saying, "Katherine," in a reproving tone. She took another puff, then returned the cigar to Vance. The mockery in her eyes was for him, but when she spoke it was to Worden.

"George, that's pretty shoddy merchandise."

"You're acting like a child, Katherine."

"You disapprove of me, George?"

Worden flushed. "I didn't say any such thing."

"There's disapproval in your voice," she said. Then, to Vance, she added, "I suppose you too disapprove. A man may have all sorts of vices. A man may smoke, drink, gamble, brawl, make love, and it's quite all right. But let a woman indulge herself and—"

Worden appeared shocked. "I'm sure your father wouldn't approve of this."

Kate laughed. Laughter with her came easily.

Vance said, "George, you've got to understand this girl. She likes to bait a man. She's baiting you right now."

Kate said, "So you understand me, Vance? If you do, why not ride over to Bell some evening. I could do with another suitor. George here is so busy with his storekeeping that he comes courting only on Sundays, and a girl gets lonely between Sundays."

Worden frowned.

Vance said, "I'll give the matter some thought, Miss Belden," and turned away. When he was almost to the barroom door, she called him and he faced about. "Yes?"

"John Belden is in there," she told him. "You're likely to get your head blown off if you go in. Better leave the way you came."

"You're quite a joker, Miss Belden."

"Maybe I'm in earnest about this, *Mister* Vance."

"Maybe you are," he said. "Maybe you're afraid John Belden will get *his* head blown off if he starts anything with me."

He went into the saloon. He was the target of hostile stares the instant he stepped into the barroom. Belden's ramrod, burly Matt Yarnell, and two Bell hands stood at the near end of the bar. John Belden himself sat alone at a table, a giant of a man with an iron-gray beard and flinty eyes. At the far end of the bar stood three Mexicans, two garbed in the rather gaudy attire of *vaqueros* and the third rigged in the even gaudier style of the *haciendado*. This fashion plate from south of the Rio Grande was Don Luis Jaime Baca y Aragon.

Behind the bar was Worden's handyman, known only as Limpy. Small, wizened, with a game leg, Limpy was the only man present who might have had reason to be soured on life. He was, however, the only one who gave Vance a civil greeting.

Filling a shot glass for Vance, he said, "All slicked up, aren't you, Will?"

Vance took a place midway between the Bell men and the Mexicans, and said, "I'm going on a trip, Limpy—to Valido."

"Wish I were going along."

"I'm traveling by buckboard. There's room for you."

"Can't get away," Limpy said. "The boss can't get along without me." He took to the till the coin Vance laid upon the bar. "If you get around to Tille Shane's house, say 'hello' to the girls for me."

Vance said, "I'll do that," and reached for his drink.

Aragon had turned and now said, to John Belden, "There is the *hombre* who nearly lost his tongue yesterday."

Belden showed a quick interest. "Yeah? How's that?"

"He was mouthing insults."

"He's good at that."

"But when I showed him my knife," Aragon said, "he apologized."

The old man looked at Vance but spoke to Aragon. "He's insulted me more than once, but never apologized. Maybe I should have scared him with a knife."

Vance downed his drink, put his cigar back in his mouth. He faced about and rested his elbows on the bar. He was being baited; he had no doubt about that. Oddly, he felt within him a sudden surge of excitement. Yesterday Aragon had come to Spur headquarters with his two *vaqueros* and told Vance that he'd heard that Spur was a cross-dog outfit, that riders crossing its range were likely to be fired upon. Vance had told him it was true, that ever since the murder of his partner, Sam Avery, three months ago, he'd been suspicious of everybody.

Avery had failed to come in off the range one night; Vance and Mario had found him the next morning, after an all-night search, shot in the back. Vance had suspected John Belden of having had his partner murdered. A week before, Belden had tried to buy out Avery's half interest in Spur.

Vance had gone to Bell, accused the old man to his face. Belden had sworn that he'd had nothing to do with the murder, and Vance still, three months later, did not know the identity of the murderer, and so was leery of every rider trespassing on Spur. He feared that he too might be bushwhacked. He couldn't prove that Belden was responsible for Avery's death, but in his own mind he hadn't cleared the man.

As for Aragon, he'd talked rough and Vance had talked even rougher. The Mexican had threatened him, reached for the knife in his boot. Vance had put hand to gun. Aragon had thought better of making use of his knife, but he'd raked his black stallion with his spurs and tried to ride Vance down. In ducking the horse's charge, Vance had tripped, fallen, rolled in the dirt.

Aragon and his *compadres* had galloped away by the time Vance picked himself up, and only Mario's intervention had kept Vance, wild with rage, from shooting the Mexican in the back. There had been no rhyme or reason for Aragon to seek trouble with him yesterday, and there was none—that Vance knew—for him to want trouble now. But want it Aragon did, and Vance was of a mind to accommodate him. He hadn't forgiven the man for rolling him in the dirt.

He had no fear of Aragon, but Belden and his men were an unknown factor. They might give the Mexican a helping hand. John Belden might jump at the chance to rid himself of

the man who barred him from the water on Spur range.

VANCE puffed on his cigar, trying to decide whether to take Aragon's rawhiding or to gamble that the Bell men would keep out of a brawl between the two of them. It was decided for him. Kate Belden came in from the store. Her presence would be a restraining influence on the old man, Vance was certain. Beldon looked at her, scowling.

"Daughter, get out of here," he said. "A saloon is no place for a lady."

Vance said, "Let her stay, Belden. She's just been lamenting the fact that men have all the fun. Let her see how men behave, and maybe she'll realize that it's far from being fun."

Belden said, "Don't interfere between me and mine, Vance. That's one thing I won't take from you."

"You afraid she'll spoil something for you by being here?"

"I tell you—"

Aragon cut in, "You see, Senor Belden, this *hombre* has a loose tongue."

Belden gave him a sour look. "I don't need to be told what Vance is."

Vance chuckled. "That's right, old man. Don't put any stock in what this dude from Coahuila says. He's the biggest liar ever to cross over from Mexico." He heard Kate gasp. He went on, "If he'd pulled that knife on me like he claims, I'd have rammed it down his lying throat."

The smile had faded from the face of Luis Aragon, and even John Belden, boot-tough though he was, appeared startled by the challenge flung at the man from Coahuila. For a long moment it was so quiet in the barroom that no one seemed to draw a breath. Vance was sure of Belden now. The man would take no part in whatever happened since his daughter was there, and she, perhaps because of a lively curiosity, seemed to have no intention of leaving.

Aragon shattered the quiet with a Spanish oath. He moved out from the bar, facing in Vance's direction. He stooped to draw the knife from his boot. There was murder in his eyes as he came erect, knife in hand.

He cut a fine figure, this Luis Aragon. His sombrero hung at his shoulders by its chinstrap, and his black hair lay in gleaming waves about his proud head. He was a slender youth in a *chaqueta* embroidered with gold and silver thread, laced *calzoneras*, a crimson sash, and boots of embossed leather mounted with silver spurs. He had a hawk's beak of a nose, a natty mustache, a receding chin. The Spanish conquistadores must have looked much like Luis Aragon.

Vance took a final puff on his cigar, then laid it on the edge of the bar. He moved out, facing Aragon.

John Belden said sharply, "Daughter, get out of here!"

Vance's excitement was now a terrific pressure, but his eagerness to knock some of the arrogance out of the youth was tempered by the realization that there was deadly danger. The knife would be razor sharp, and Aragon was certainly expert in its use. Too, there were the man's companions to be considered. They would have to be dealt with when Aragon could no longer take care of himself. But Vance had no thought of backing down. The memory of his being rolled in the dirt was too clear.

He said, "Come on, punk. Or are you going to stand there and tell us more of your lies?"

Aragon cursed again in Spanish, leapt forward, took a wicked swipe at Vance. Sidestepping the fleeing thrust of the blade, Vance caught the Mexican with a back-handed blow to the face and staggered him against the bar. Aragon pirouetted before Vance could close in, and jabbed with his knife. Its point struck a cartridge in Vance's gun belt and rang like a tuning fork. Aragon was cat-quick, and next tried for the Spur man's throat. He missed by a scant margin, then had his right wrist caught by Vance's left hand. Vance clouted him between the eyes with his right fist, staggering him again.

They reeled one way and another in a desperate straining against each other, the one trying to free his knife hand and the other striking clubbing blows. Vance battered the youth's face, but took a knee in the groin that bent him over with pain.

He kept hold of Aragon's wrist, however,

and rammed a shoulder into him to slam him heavily against the bar. The impact knocked the breath out of Aragon; more, it jarred the knife from his hand. As the weapon fell, Vance released the Mexican and stooped to capture it. He was kicked hard in the ribs, and jolted off balance. He fell to the floor.

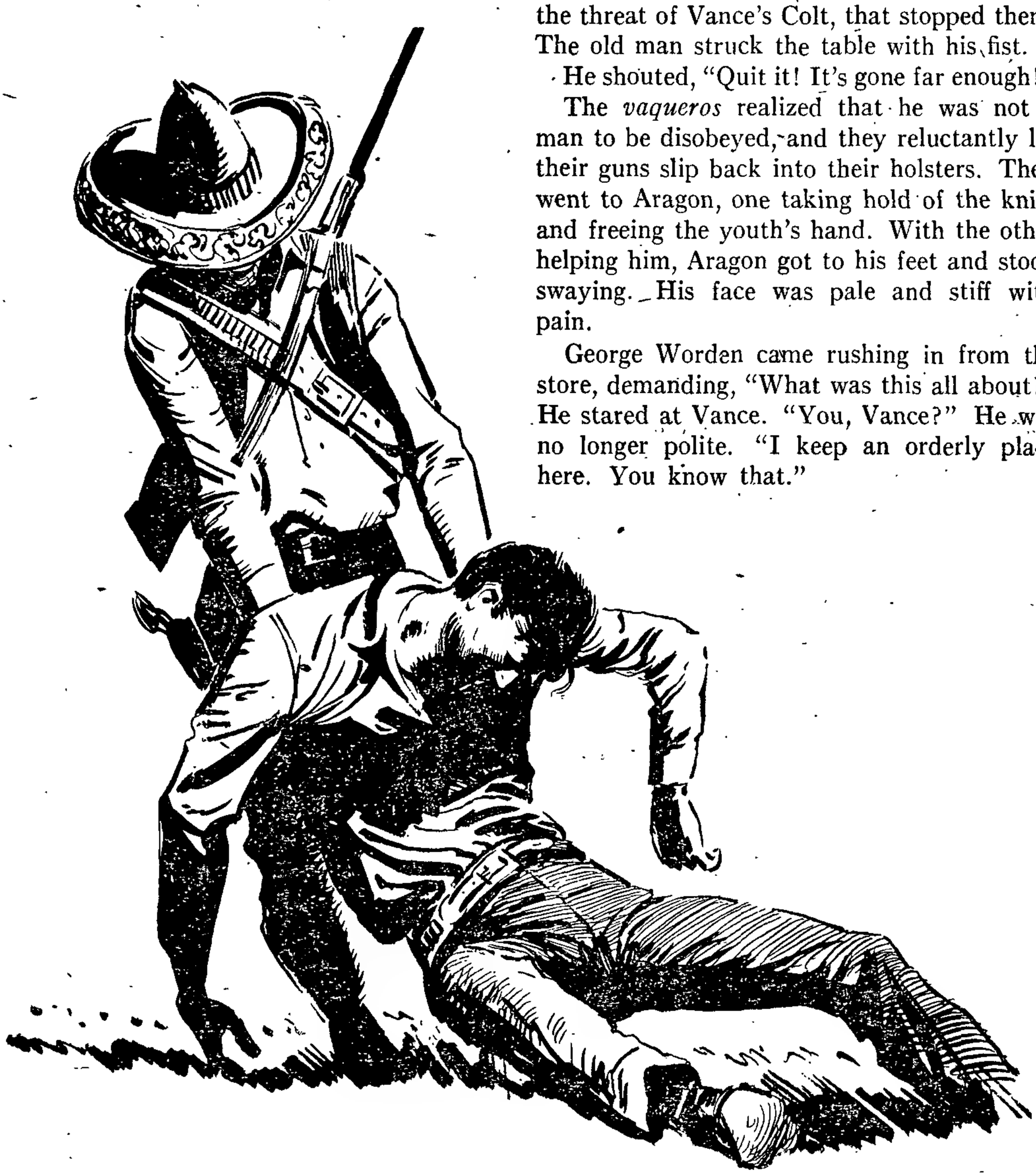
He saw Aragon retrieve the knife, and panic swept through him. He heaved over in a roll as the Mexican attempted to drop on top of him, and from his back kicked out wildly. The toe of his boot caught Aragon in the neck, and again the man lost his knife. The two of them scrambled for it, and Vance was the quicker. He swung the knife up and brought it down with all his might, and a scream ripped from deep within Aragon as the plade pierced his hand and skewered it to the plank floor.

Vance rolled away, came to his feet with his gun in his hand, and pointed at Aragon's companions. He caught them drawing their guns, but it was John Belden, rather than the threat of Vance's Colt, that stopped them. The old man struck the table with his fist.

He shouted, "Quit it! It's gone far enough!"

The *vaqueros* realized that he was not a man to be disobeyed, and they reluctantly let their guns slip back into their holsters. They went to Aragon, one taking hold of the knife and freeing the youth's hand. With the other helping him, Aragon got to his feet and stood swaying. His face was pale and stiff with pain.

George Worden came rushing in from the store, demanding, "What was this all about?" He stared at Vance. "You, Vance?" He was no longer polite. "I keep an orderly place here. You know that."



Vance lay, numbed by pain, until they dragged him to the barn

Kate Belden said, "George, the other man started it." Her voice was off key. She looked very much upset. "Don't blame Vance."

Worden merely grunted in reply, then told the *vaqueros* to take Aragon to the other room. "I'll have to bandage his hand," he added.

Vance holstered his gun as the merchant led the three Mexicans from the barroom. He stepped to the bar, picked up his cigar, and struck a match to relight it. He found himself thinking that Worden must consider Aragon someone special, and he recalled that Mario had said yesterday that the youth came of a rich and important family down in Coahuila. He began to wonder what Aragon was doing in Estrella.

HE LOOKED at Belden. "Do I owe you thanks for keeping those two from starting a gunfight?"

"You owe me nothing," Belden said, shoving back his chair and heaving to his feet. "I stopped them so that my daughter wouldn't be endangered. I have no love for you, Vance. You've been a burr under my saddle for the two years that I've been in this country. Those Mexicans could have gutshot you for all I care—though I doubt that they could have out-gunned you." There was a grudging respect in his eyes. "No, I don't think they could have taken you. But they'll get you in the end—unless you clear out of these parts."

"Clear out and let you have Spur range, eh?"

Belden ignored that. "You don't know who that young Mex is, do you?" he asked, and did not wait for an answer. "You ever hear of the bandit, Jose Durango?"

"Sure, I've heard of him. I even saw him once, when he crossed over into Texas and terrorized Presidio down on the Rio Grande. What's Durango got to do with Aragon?"

"Aragon is under Durango's protection."

"Why should he be under the protection of a *bandido*?"

"Ask Durango when he comes calling on you," Belden said, "as he's sure to do, to pay you back for knifing Aragon. Ask him before he sews you up in a wet cowhide or stakes you out on an anthill."

"You've got me scared, Belden—almost."

"Then do the sensible thing—sell out to me."

"Why not wait until Durango finishes me off, and get Spur for nothing?"

"I'm willing to pay for what I want."

Vance's face took on a stubborn look. "I'll take my chances with Durango," he said, "like I take them with you. Spur Ranch isn't much, but it's all I have. It's my home. I won't be scared off. And I won't be driven off by you or by Durango or by anyone else, not without a fight. This Jose Durango isn't such a great man that a forty-five slug can't stop him." He shook his head. "No, you're not getting Spur, Belden."

"Have it your way," Belden said. He strode to the door, faced about there to say, "Don't come running to me for help when Durango shows up. You won't get it."

He went out on that, followed by his daughter and the two Bell cowhands. His foreman, Yarnell, lingered to stare at Vance. He was a thick-bodied man, ruddy of complexion, wearing a habitual scowl as though he had a grudge at the whole world.

Vance said, "Well, get it said, Matt."

Yarnell nodded. "I intend to," he said. "Looking out for the Bell herds is my job, and I do my job. I'm getting sick of fooling around with you, and I figure that the boss is getting fed up, too. If this drought lasts and Bell's water supply gets any shorter, he's sure to move cattle through the Frios onto Spur. And he'll be in the right. What water there is should be for everybody, not just for one man. It's high time Bell got its share."

"Matt, I'll tell you this," Vance said. "Bell could share Barquino Spring, for all I care. But it's not just a question of water. There's the grass. Sure, there's still enough graze for my cattle. But there won't be enough if the rain doesn't come. And there won't be if I let Bell cattle come onto Spur. So don't let old Belden push any cattle through the Frios. Don't let him make that mistake unless you want to see him stop a Winchester slug."

Yarnell swore and said, "All right. You're warned and I'm warned. So be it."

He turned out of the saloon, his boots heels striking angry sound from the plank flooring.

Vance followed him outside, ignored the Bell people who were now mounting their

horses, and strode along the gallery. He was aware that John Belden was looking after him with a black scowl, however, and that the girl Kate watched him with a sharp interest.

Around at the side of the building, he untied his team and got to the buckboard's seat. He drove from Estrella in something of a hurry, so that Aragon's *compadres* wouldn't have the opportunity to back-shoot him. Beyond Estrella, the road stretched on and on through wild and empty country.

By the time he reached Valido, which was at noon of the third day of his trip, Vance had plenty of time to wonder about the man he was to meet. The man's name was Dan Avery, and he was Sam Avery's nephew and heir. All Vance knew about him was that he hailed from Philadelphia and was twenty-seven or eight years old.

Sam Avery himself had known little about Dan. In fact, Sam hadn't seen him in nearly twenty years. It had been after the death of Martha Avery, which had occurred shortly after Spur Range was founded, that his partner had spoken to Vance of the nephew.

He'd said, "There'll be only one of the family left after I'm gone, Will—my brother's son. If anything happens to me, I want him to inherit my interest in Spur."

At the time Vance hadn't paid much attention. Sam Avery had been only in his early fifties, and seemed good for another thirty years. But a bullet in the back could do for the hardiest of men.

After Sam's death, Vance had looked through his partner's papers and found Dan's address. He'd written a letter to the nephew, telling him of Sam's death, and that, though there was no will, Dan was his heir. He'd suggested that Dan visit Spur Ranch and look over his inheritance.

There had been no immediate reply, but a week ago, there'd come a letter telling him that young Avery would arrive at Valido on the 17th of July. This was the 17th, and Vance drove into Valido hoping that his new partner would be half the man the uncle had been.

A stagecoach ran twice a week between the railroad and the town, a hundred-mile trip, today it had arrived early. The old Concord stood at the side of the National House, its team already unhitched and led away. Vance pulled up before the hotel, got from the buckboard, tied the mules to the hitch-rack. He saw no one who looked like a tenderfoot. Several men lounged on the hotel porch, but they were town loafers. Entering the lobby, Vance saw only a woman sitting there. He crossed to the desk to talk to the owner, fat Herb Naylor.

"Herb, did a man named Avery come in on today's coach?"

Naylor nodded. "He asked for you as soon as he got here, which was more than an hour ago," he said. "The stage was early. When I told him I hadn't seen you in a couple of months, he went off somewhere. But that's his wife yonder."

"His wife?"

"That's how he introduced her to me," Naylor said, and his pudgy face showed a broad grin. "I didn't ask for the license."

VANCE said, "Herb, you're a card, a real card." But he wasn't amused. Dan Avery's letter had said nothing about a wife, and Vance wished there weren't one. Spur Ranch was trouble ridden, and no place for a woman.

Naylor said, "She's really something. A looker. And class." His gaze strayed to the woman seated at the far side of the lobby. "A real lady. Weren't you expecting the dude to bring his woman, Will?"

Vance said, "No, I wasn't," and turned to cross the room.

He removed his hat as he halted before her, seeing now that she was something special. Never in Valido, a grubby sort of town, did one see so fashionably dressed and well-groomed a woman as this. She was a blonde; her hair beneath the jaunty hat was the color of ripe wheat. Her features were finely molded, her complexion flawless. She was a soft woman, Vance thought, the sort that needed pampering. A ranch woman needed some pioneer sturdiness. Kate Belden had it. This woman did not. She had a fragile look.

She was looking up at him, smiling faintly with amusement because he was staring. She said, "Yes?" Her voice was low and husky, a disturbing voice.

"I'm Will Vance, Mrs. Avery."

She said, "On, how nice," and rose and extended a gloved hand.

He took her hand. It was surprisingly small in his. "Sorry I didn't get here in time to meet the stage," he said. "It usually gets in at noon and—"

"It was early," she said, "or so we were told. You really don't need to apologize, Mr. Vance. I was glad for the chance to rest after traveling so far in that horrid stage-coach." She studied him, her head tilted to one side and that faint smile on her lips. "You're different from what I expected, Mr. Vance. I thought that . . . well, that you would be an older man."

"And I didn't expect a *Mrs.* Avery."

"I'm not disappointed. I hope you're not."

"Disappointed?" he said, and found himself grinning. "On the contrary. But you may not find the ranch to your liking. It's nothing like . . . well, like what you must be used to."

"I'll adjust myself, I'm sure. Is there a Mrs. Vance?"

"No. You'll be the only woman at Spur."

"Really? Perhaps that will be an interesting new experience. I've never been anyplace where I was the only woman."

"I've an idea you'll find it pretty lonely."

She shook her head. "I won't be lonely," she said, and though she smiled and her tone was light she seemed in earnest. "No, I never miss the company of members of my own sex."

There seemed to be a hidden meaning there, but Vance decided it was wise not to look for it. He began to suspect that Dan Avery's wife had a flirtatious side to her nature. He said, "By the way, where is your husband? I'd like to start back to Spur Ranch as soon as I can."

Her smile faded and a hurt look appeared in her eyes. "I'm afraid he'll be quite a little while," she said. "Dan's not a good traveler. He was a bit under the weather when we got off the stage and . . . well, he had no appetite. So I went to dinner alone, and he went for a walk."

"I'll go look for him. Like I said, I want to start back to Spur."

"But how will you find him? You don't know Dan, or even what he looks like."

Vance said, laughing, "I'll know him when I see him," and turned to the door.

He knew from the way she had acted where to look for her husband. When he reached the street, he headed for the nearest saloon. The place was empty except for the bartender and one customer. The customer was so patently a tenderfoot in his brown suit, stiff collar, green tie, and narrow-brimmed hat that Vance knew he'd found his man.

Dan Avery was of medium height, slight of build, a handsome man but one without much character showing in his face. At the moment his face was flushed from the whisky he'd downed during the past hour. He was doing his own pouring; there was a half-empty bottle and a filled shot glass before him. He was lifting the glass now, with a not too sure hand.

Vance crossed to him, laid a hand on his shoulder, and said, "Dan, I'm Will Vance. I don't want to rush you, but we'd better get started for Spur Ranch."

Avery looked at him somewhat bleary-eyed. "Vance, is it?" he said thickly. "Glad to know you, friend Vance. What's the hurry? Have a drink with me, eh?" He motioned to the bartender. "A glass for my friend, fellow."

The bartender set a glass before Vance, saying, low-voiced, "Here's a man who can really put it away."

Avery had emptied his own glass. Now he refilled it and poured a drink for Vance. He was so unsteady that he spilled quite a little whisky on the bar. He lifted his glass, saying, "Here's to you, friend Vance, an honest man if ever there was one."

Reaching for his own drink, Vance regarded him curiously. "Do you mean something by that, Dan?"

"Sure. Just what I said. You're an honest man if ever there was one."

"I still don't get your meaning."

"All I mean is that if you weren't so honest I'd never have come into old Sam Avery's estate," Avery said. "I didn't know he owned a ranch. In fact, friend, I thought he must have died years ago. So if you'd been dishonest, you could have cheated me out of my inheritance and I'd have been none the wiser. Old Sam didn't even have a will, and you still didn't try to cheat me." He downed his drink. "So I say you're an honest man if ever there was one."

Vance emptied his glass, deciding that he

did indeed need a drink. He had made his appraisal of the nephew; Dan Avery wasn't any part the man his uncle had been.

He said, "Time to go, Dan."

"What's your hurry?"

"We've a long trip ahead of us."

"Can't be far to the ranch."

"It's far, all right."

"A couple of miles, maybe?"

"If we get started now," Vance said, "we'll reach Spur the day after tomorrow. So let's get started."

Avery reached for the bottle again. "Where is this ranch, anyway? Beyond civilization?"

"You might say that, and not be far wrong," Vance said. He took the bottle and slid it across to the bartender. "Get rid of that, will you?"

Avery started to protest. Vance took him by the arm, said, "Let's go," and tried to move him away from the bar.

Avery whipped around with explosive rage and gave him a shove. Vance struck out without conscious thought, his fist catching Avery on the jaw. The man's head rocked back and he sagged against the bar, his eyes glazed. Vance again caught him by the arm, this time to keep him from falling. Avery rubbed his jaw with his left hand.

"Never push me, Dan," Vance said. "Don't make that mistake a second time." He glanced at the bartender. "Does he owe you any money?"

"No. We're square."

Vance kept his grip on Avery, said, "Come on," and moved him away from the bar.

Avery tried to break loose as they crossed to the door, then began a muttered cursing when Vance's hold proved too firm. They left the saloon like that, and headed toward the hotel. Avery moved on wobbly legs, and only Vance's hand on his arm kept him from staggering. The woman was in the hotel doorway, watching them. As they drew close, she crossed the porch and descended the steps. She said nothing at all to her husband, but it seemed to Will Vance that there was contempt in her eyes.

To him, she said, "We'll leave right away?"

"As soon as I get him aboard the buckboard."

"Our luggage is in the lobby."

"I'll get it," Vance said, and then, boosting Dan Avery to the rig's rear seat, he thought what a poor way this was to begin a brand-new partnership.

THE first leg of the journey wasn't too bad. Avery sulked, evidently feeling that he had been abused. He complained about the length of the trip, but he was so befuddled by drink that he grew only slightly argumentative when his wife hushed him, so Vance was able to ignore him. He was sober by the time they reached Grazia Plaza, sober but looking sickly. There was an inn at the little Mexican village, and they obtained rooms and had supper there.

After he'd eaten and then seen that his mules had been properly cared for, Vance went to his room, stripped to the waist, washed up and began to shave. He was scraping away wiry stubble when there was a knock at his door. Thinking it was the proprietor of the place, he called, "Come in," and went on with his shaving. The door opened, and in the foggy wall mirror he saw that it was Mrs. Avery who entered.

He put down his razor, wiped his face with a towel, then, sharply aware that he was naked to the waist, moved to the bed to pick up and don his shirt. He felt some embarrassment over her finding him like that, but he saw nothing in her manner to reveal that she felt as he did. She had prepared herself for bed, and wore a green wrapper over her nightgown. Her hair had been let down; it hung in soft, heavy waves to her shoulders, glinting richly like old gold in the lamplight.

He said, "What is wrong, Mrs. Avery?"

"Dan went out right after we finished supper," she said. "I hoped that he would be with you."

"I haven't seen him since supper."

"Well, I suppose there's no use worrying."

Vance buttoned his shirt. He took it for granted that she was worried, or else she wouldn't have come looking for her husband. He said, "There's a *cantina* nearby. Dan probably found it."

"Yes."

"You want me to go after him?"

She considered a moment, then shook her head. "It will make him angry."

"Is he often like this?"

"Often?" She smiled a bitter smile. "Almost always."

"Too bad."

"You can't imagine how bad," she said. "Only a woman married to a man who loves a bottle above everything can realize how bad it is."

"I'll go after him," Vance said. "It will be better to have him sore tonight than sick all day tomorrow." He crossed the small room. "Is it all right with you, Mrs. Avery?"

"My name is Claire. When you say 'Mrs. Avery,' it sounds as though we aren't friends and won't ever be friends." She smiled—dazzlingly, it seemed to Vance. "Won't you call me 'Claire,' Will?"

"I'll give it some thought, anyway, Mrs. Avery."

"Well, that's putting me in my place. Don't you like Dan and me, Will?"

He shrugged. "It's not a question of my liking you," he said.

"What is it, then?"

"If I had a wife, I wouldn't want another man calling her by her first name."

"But among friends . . ."

"The three of us won't stay friends if Dan gets the idea that you and I are on too intimate terms," he said. "And he might get such a notion if he comes back from that *cantina* and doesn't find you in your room. Now shall I go after him, Mrs. Avery?"

She remained there, just inside the door which she had closed after entering. She pretended not to understand that he expected her to leave.

She said, "He won't come back to find that I'm not in my room." Her voice was a husky whisper, and somehow vibrant. "He'll stay in that place until he's too drunk to remember he has a wife."

He saw the flush in her cheeks, the brightness of her eyes, her quickened breathing. He no longer needed to wonder; she hadn't come here looking for her husband, nor did she want him to go after Dan. She might be the neglected wife, but that did not excuse her conduct. At least, that was how it seemed to him.

There was a wanton streak in Claire Avery. But even as he knew her for what she was, he found himself wanting her. He realized that he would have been less than a man not to want her, attractive as she was. But he realized this too: he could no more take another man's woman than he could rustle another man's cattle.

He said, "Nothing but grief could come of our making anything of this. You know that as well as I do."

"You're always rough with people, aren't you?" she said. "You're being as rough with me as you were with Dan yesterday in that saloon at Valido. Yes, I saw the bruise on his jaw. I couldn't help but notice it." She gave him a bitter smile. "But my bruise won't show, will it?"

"I doubt that you're really hurt, Mrs. Avery."

"You think I have no feelings?"

"I think," he said, "you'd better understnd how it is with me. Dan's my partner. I hope he'll be my friend. I won't cheat him—in any way. Now, Mrs. Avery, do you still want me to go after him?"

She gave him a furious look, then turned and opened the door. Over her shoulder she said, "If you've got to save him too from himself, go after him. At any rate, goodnight. Goodnight, Mr. Vance. I hope you sleep well."

Watching her angry retreat to her own room, seeing how she slammed the door, he doubted that he would sleep well. She'd succeeded in what she set out to do. She had made him want her, all right.

After a minute or two, he set out for the *cantina*. He found Dan there, drinking tequila. One glance told him that his partner had already drunk so much of the native liquor that he would be one sick tenderfoot, come morning.

AVERY was indeed sick in the morning, and Vance was forced to wait around with the mules in harness for nearly two hours before the tenderfoot was able to start out. Twice within the first five miles on the road Vance had to rein in and let Avery out of the rig, for the motion of the buckboard made him feel worse. It was not until nearly noon that the man began to recover from his hangover. Then he grew sulky and seemed to pity himself.

He got no pity from anyone else. His wife was more contemptuous than pitying, and Vance ignored him. He tried too to ignore the woman, but without success. He was sharply aware of her, there behind him on the back seat, so close that he could have turned and reached out to her.

A night's restless sleep hadn't eased the desire she'd aroused in him, and because of that he silently cursed himself for being a fool. She wasn't his to take, no matter how great his desire, and it was senseless for him to want her. Somehow he had to get her out of his system. A voice in his mind seemed to say, but how do you get over wanting a woman?

As he drove along the lonely road, keeping the mules moving at a fast trot, he puzzled over the Averys. He wondered what ailed them. They were a young and attractive couple. There were signs that they'd led a good life back East; their clothing was expensive, and they'd brought along a surprising amount of luggage.

He had no idea what sort of job Dan had worked at back in Philadelphia, but certainly the man had a good income. They could not have known hardship, and trouble as he knew it, down in the Big Bend, was certainly unfamiliar to them. Yet the man was a drunkard and the woman a wanton. Vance could not help but wonder about the reason for their being as they were.

Nothing in Claire's manner showed that she felt any remorse for her behavior last night. Occasionally she would draw Vance's attention to some landmark, question him about it: This morning, when they met at breakfast, she had looked at him clear-eyed and greeted him in a perfectly normal tone.

It was as though she had not come to his room and revealed herself to him as a woman of easy virtue. She seemed to have no embarrassment, no shame. Vance wondered if he would ever understand the Averys, and he doubted the wisdom of his taking them to Spur. Still, he was stuck with them.

They spent that second night at Hall Fenton's place. Fenton was in the cattle business, but his buildings were along the road and he found himself giving so many travelers board and lodging that he and his Mexican wife now operated an inn. Vance knew that Fenton kept liquor on the premises, so he called the man aside and asked him not to give Avery anything to drink even if the man asked for it.

Fenton was agreeable. "I'll hide my jug, Will."

It worked out, but in the morning Dan Avery was so badly in need of a drink that he was pale and had the shakes. The man was sick in a different way that morning. His nerves began to fray during the long, monotonous drive. The sun hurt his eyes, the heat was for him almost unendurable. By midmorning he was suffering torment and moaning agonizingly. It was not something Vance could ignore.

He said finally, "Look, we'll get to Estrella about noon. If it's a drink you need, you can get one there."

Avery said thickly, "It's medicine to me, Vance. I'm a sick man."

"All right. But get hold of yourself. You'll make it to Estrella."

They reached Estrella at noon. A dog ran out and started a ferocious barking as Vance halted the mules before George Worden's building. Two Mexican women gossiping over by one of the adobe huts fell silent to gape at Claire. Three barefoot kids swarmed noisily about the buckboard. Today only one horse stood at Worden's hitch-rack.

George Worden appeared at the store doorway, nodding with a restraint that showed he hadn't forgiven Vance for his brawl with Luis Aragon there in the place of business. His coolness vanished at sight of the Averys, however, and curiosity brought him out to the gallery.

Vance introduced him to the Averys and said, "After we leave here we will be beyond civilization. George's place is the last outpost. Right, George?"

Worden appeared flattered. Smiling, he said, "There's some truth in that." He recognized the couple as his own kind, and invited them inside. "It's still a long drive to Mr. Vance's ranch," he told them. "Come in and rest a few minutes. I can offer you coffee."

He seemed eager for them to accept, and Dan Avery, prodded by his thirst, was already getting from the buckboard. It was Worden who helped Claire down. As the three went

into the store, Vance dropped to the ground and tied the mules to the hitch-rack.

He looked up to see that two men had come from the barroom and were watching him from just outside its entrance. One was Worden's man, Limpy. The other was the Bell ramrod, the sour-faced Matt Yarnell. He walked along the gallery toward them, saying hello to Limpy and giving Yarnell a nod that got him a flat stare in return.

Limpy said, "Fancy company you're keeping these days, Will."

Vance nodded. "Sam Avery's nephew and his wife."

"A handsome woman, his wife."

Vance said, "Yes," and let it go at that.

YARNELL turned away abruptly, going to the hitch-rack. He jerked loose his horse's reins and swung to the saddle. He reined the animal away from the rack, then lifted it to a lope. He nearly ran down one of the kids playing in the road as he headed south toward Bell Ranch.

"There's a man with something sticking in his craw," Limpy said. "Sometimes I think it's getting the best of him, whatever it is. He acts a little loco now and then. Like today—he came in to buy a bottle of liniment, then loafed around for three, four hours. All of a sudden he's in a high hurry."

"In a big hurry to tell John Belden that I've brought Sam Avery's nephew to Spur."

"Why should that interest old Belden?"

"Young Avery is Sam's heir," Vance said. "Yarnell guessed that. He'll tell Belden that there may now be a chance for him to buy an interest in Spur. He could never buy Sam or me out, but—" there was a trace of worry in Vance's voice— "he may have more luck in dealing with the dude."

"You and Belden partners? That'd be something."

"Yeah. I'd rather be partners with the devil himself."

"Speaking of the devil," Limpy said, "reminds me that I wanted to talk to you about that Mex, Aragon."

"What about Aragon?"

Limpy turned to the doorway and looked inside to make sure that Worden hadn't come into the barroom. Then, low-voiced, he said, "I don't want the boss to catch on that I'm talking to you about this. Anyway, I've a hunch that Aragon's visit here a few days ago means that Durango will show up one dark night. If Aragon came to Estrella by way of Spur, it's likely that Durango will come by the same trail. If he should, you get word to me that he's on his way—as fast as you can. Come yourself or send that rider of yours. I'll send a message to the Rangers, and maybe they'll get here in time to catch the *bandido* in a gun trap. The Rangers want him bad for raiding over in Texas."

"You a Ranger, Limpy?"

"Me? Not with my game leg. But I've got friends who are Rangers." Limpy took another look inside, then went on, "It's a long story how I happen to be here keeping an eye open for Durango. So I'll just say now that I've got a score to even up with him. You'll get word to me?"

"If Durango shows up, sure."

"He'll show up, all right."

"What makes you so sure?"

"He buys provisions from George Worden," Limpy said. "Two, three times a year. The Rangers know that, but they never know when he'll show up or by what trail, so they've never been able to set a trap for him."

"So the gentlemanly George Worden does business with Durango."

"There's profit in it, big profit."

"And that makes it right?" Vance said. "Well, we'll do what we can to see to it that he loses that bandit for a customer. You can count on me, Limpy."

LATE in the afternoon they drove through the Frio Hills by way of one of the few passes in that rocky range. They passed close to the base of Drum Butte's towering red bulk, and then Vance reined in.

He said, "This is it, folks. This is Spur range."

Avery exclaimed, "But it's nothing but empty space.!"

Vance turned to face him. "There's grass and water. That's all we need."

"But where are the cattle?"

"Scattered all over. You'll see a few on the way to headquarters."

Claire said, "I see something moving," and

pointed west across the range. "I can't make out what it is. Can you, Will?"

Vance took a look, then nodded. "That's a desert witch, Mrs. Avery," he said, and laughed at her incredulous expression. "A small whirlwind that's picked up dust," he said. "In most places it would be called a dust devil, but here in the Big Bend it's a desert witch."

"Very interesting," Avery said. "But where in heaven's name are the buildings? We do own some buildings, don't we?"

"We've got buildings, all right. You'll see them before sundown."

"Well, since we've practically arrived at our estate," Avery said, "we should drink to it. Will anyone join me, or has everybody signed the pledge?"

Vance said, "Pull the cork, Dan." He had to get along with the man, he reflected, and this was as good a time as any to make a start.

Avery had come from Worden's store with a large paper-wrapped package, a sizable supply of whisky to see him through a dry spell at Spur Ranch. He took a bottle from the package, drew the cork. He handed the bottle to Vance, who took a long pull at it. When the bottle was returned to him, Avery took a drink and shortly followed it with a second and then a third. It was reluctantly that he pushed the cork back into the bottle. His thirst was indeed difficult to quench.

They came within sight of Spur's buildings after another hour of fast driving, and now Vance saw the place differently than ever before. He saw it as it must look to the Averys. The buildings were nothing much. They were of brown adobe, squat, with *viga* poles jutting from the walls. There was the bunkhouse that was home to him and Mario Verdugo, and the ranchhouse, long closed, that Sam Avery had built for his wife.

There was the barn, with a pole corral attached, and the roofed well midway between bunkhouse and ranchhouse. Sam Avery and he had been proud of their headquarters. Martha Avery had liked it here. But Vance knew that it must look grubby to this couple from the East.

He felt this more keenly when he showed them into the ranchhouse. He'd told Mario to open the house for an airing, to sweep and dust the three rooms. This had been done, but it was not much of an improvement. The furnishings were old and they'd seen much service, here and in the half-dozen other places where Sam and Martha had lived. Being hauled so often from place to place did household things no good. Because he was sure the young couple were used to much better, Vance felt somewhat disturbed.

Dan Avery was outspoken. "What a shoddy place!"

Claire moved about the parlor, looked into bedroom and kitchen. "It's better than no home at all," she said finally. And added, with a bitter look at her husband, "As the saying goes, beggars can't be choosers."

Vance wondered about that as he went out for their luggage. It was the first hint he'd had that the Averys were down on their luck, and it came as a surprise to him. Everything about them looked like money. As he lifted a pair of traveling bags from the buckboard, he felt a stirring of anger within him. He decided that what had been good enough for Sam Avery should be good enough for his heir. Another thing that bothered him was Dan's failure to mention the man who had left him the house and an interest in Spur Ranch. Dan had asked no questions at all about his uncle, alive or dead. It was as though Sam Avery had never existed.

The luggage inside, Vance drove to the corral. Mario came to help him unhitch the mules. Vance asked, "How did it go while I was away, *amigo*?"

"There was no trouble," the *vaquero* said. "I saw no Bell riders. Aragon and his *compadres* rode by late the day you left, but they passed at a distance."

"I ran into Aragon at Estrella. There was a little trouble there."

"Como?"

Vance told him of his fight with the Mexican. Then said, "You didn't tell me he's a friend of Jose Durango."

"It is a story one hears. I don't know if it is true."

"Why does Aragon rate Durango's protection?"

"The story is that he is Durango's son."

"I thought he came of a rich and important family."

Mario shrugged. "Maybe there is no truth to it. Still, it is a story that is told on both sides of the Rio Grande. It seems that Durango was a *vaquero* on the Aragon *rancho* when he was young. His *patron* had a daughter. It was forbidden for the *vaqueros* even to look at this girl, but Durango looked—and more. He managed to see her alone, and one day she found that she was with child. Durango fled for his life. If he had not, he would have taken part in a marriage and then in a funeral. The girl's family would have let him live only long enough to give the child a name."

"So Aragon is his illegitimate son?"

"*Si.* So the story goes. He acknowledges Aragon as his son. He is proud to have a son by the daughter of a fine family."

"And Aragon is proud of him?"

"It could be, Will."

"It doesn't make sense, but it could be true."

"Durango had another name when he was a *vaquero,*" Mario went on. "He took the name Jose Durango only so that he could not be found. He was hunted by the men of the Aragon family, but they did not find him. He became a soldier and rose to be an officer. But there was a revolution, and he was one of the leaders. When the revolution failed, Durango was a soldier no longer, but an outlaw. He became a *bandido.* Now he is so powerful that he does not fear the Aragon family or anyone else." Mario shrugged again. "That is the story, Will, but I do not know how much truth is in it."

"You know that Durango buys provisions at Estrella?"

"There is talk among my people that Senor Worden trades with him."

"Worden's hired man thinks Durango is due in these parts."

"Maybe he is, Will."

"So we'll keep an eye open for him," Vance said. "The chances are he'll cross Spur on his way to Estrella."

VANCE rode out at sunup, starting a long swing across Spur range. He headed east toward the Frio Hills, then turned south for a half-dozen miles. He saw a few cattle with his own brand, but none with the Bell iron, as he'd feared he might. Despite Matt Yarnell's threat of three days ago, John Belden had not yet driven any of his stock through the Frios. Leaving the hills, Vance rode west until, at mid-morning, he reached the dry bed of Moreno Creek. Beyond the arroyo was a stretch of sand flats, so he turned north along the dry creek.

He was mounted on the favorite bronc in his string, a *bayo tigre* stallion that could run all day without tiring. By afternoon, when returning to headquarters, he had completed a wide circle across Spur.

A strange horse stood with trailing reins at the shady side of the barn. It gave him a start to see that the animal, a roan gelding, wore the Bell brand on its right shoulder.

He called to Mario as he dismounted at the corral, and asked, "Who's here from Bell? Not Belden himself?"

"No. It is the girl, Senor Belden's daughter."

Vance swore. "So he's using her to get to Avery," he said, and began stripping off his dun.

His anger was a wicked thing by the time he'd driven the horse into the corral. He hadn't expected John Belden to contact Dan Avery so soon. He told himself that he should have known better, and with that strode across the yard toward the ranchhouse.

Claire opened the door to his knock and said, "Come in, Will. We have a visitor."

"I know. Kate Belden."

He entered and found Kate chatting with Dan Avery. She stopped speaking, gave Vance a wary look, then said, "Hello, Vance. I thought it would be neighborly of me to drop by and become acquainted with Mr. and Mrs. Avery."

"I'll bet you did."

"Of course, my father agreed that it would be a good idea."

"Sure he did," Vance said. "Matt Yarnell rushed home to Bell yesterday to tell the old man that I'd brought the Averys to Spur. Belden couldn't wait to contact them. But I thought he would be man enough to do the contacting. I think less of him than ever, for his sending you."

Kate rose and faced him. "I offered to come," she said. "He intended to send Matt

Yarnell. I knew that would make trouble, and I wanted to avoid trouble. Give me credit for that, Vance."

"All right. I'll give you credit for that."

"Besides, I didn't give Mr. Avery my father's message. I thought it only fair to wait until you were here to hear it."

"Well, I'm here. Go ahead and say your piece."

She said, "I'm beginning to regret that I tried to be fair." She turned to Dan Avery. "Mr. Avery, my father wants to buy your interest in Spur Ranch. He'll pay you a good price. If you are interested, he would like you to come to Bell Ranch to discuss the matter. If you'd rather not come to Bell, he'll meet you at Estrella."

There was a gleam of interest in Avery's eyes. "Can you give me an idea of what your father considers a good price?"

"I'm afraid I can't."

"Without a definite offer, I can't know if I'm interested, Miss Belden," Avery said. "And until I'm interested, I see no reason to meet him."

"I'll tell my father what you say."

"You can tell him, too," Vance put in, "that Mr. Avery hasn't even had a chance to look around Spur or to size up its prospects."

His angry tone had gotten under Kate's skin from the moment he entered the house, and she gave him a frosty look now. "I doubt if my father wants me to bring any message from you, Vance."

"Tell him what I said, anyway. It doesn't matter what he wants or doesn't want."

"Don't give me orders."

"You think you can come here and ask my partner to sell out without my opening my mouth?"

"You could at least use a civil tone."

"No. I don't feel civil about this."

"You should have known John Belden would make Mr. Avery an offer."

"I knew he'd do it, but it still makes me sore."

"And so you pick on me."

"Why not? You're repping for the old rannihan."

"Maybe you'd have liked it better if Matt Yarnell had come—with a half-dozen armed Bell riders," Kate said. "Yes, I suppose you would have. You're always spoiling for a fight. One of these days you're likely to be involved in a tougher fight than you bargain for."

"Not if you Bell people stay on your own side of the Frios."

"Thanks, Vance," Kate said. "Thanks for being so gracious. The first time I come west of the Frios, you tell me not to come again. That's real neighborly of you." She turned abruptly to the door. She faced about there, and said, "Mr. Avery, I've given you my father's message. Now I'll say something on my own. It's this. I think you'd be foolish to sell out to John Belden or to anyone else. Whatever your interest in Spur is worth to John Belden, it's worth more to you. My father will probably accuse me of being disloyal for saying that, but I've got to be honest." She looked at Claire. "It was nice meeting you, Mrs. Avery. I hope you will come visit me one day soon." She swung about and left the house.

Vance stood held by surprise for a long moment, then went outside. Kate had already reached her horse. She rose to the saddle, turned the roan about, lifted it to a lope as she set out in the direction of the Frios. Vance debated a moment, then hurried to the corral. He entered the pen with a rope, dropped his loop about the neck of a stocky grey gelding. Leading the horse outside, he hastily saddled it. He mounted and rode after the girl. She was halfway to the hills when he overtook her, and then she did not rein in.

HE SAID, "Pull up. You're not in that much of a hurry."

She stopped, eyed him coldly.

He said, "I want to apologize, and to say 'thanks.'"

Kate said, in the Mexican fashion, *"Por nada."* Her voice was as chill as her eyes.

"Your telling Avery that he would be foolish to sell may be nothing to you," he told her, "but it's something to me."

"What I told him isn't likely to influence him," Kate said. "He'll sell. I have a feeling he will. He's not the man for the sort of life he'd lead at Spur. Nor is his wife suited for it." Some of the coldness went out of her manner. "Why don't you buy him out?"

"I haven't got the money."

"Too bad."

"Too bad is right."

"Still, your being sole owner of Spur probably wouldn't settle anything. There's bound to be trouble sooner or later, and it'll come sooner if the drought continues. In fact, trouble will probably come right away if John Belden figures he'll have to do a lot of dickering with Avery."

"By trouble you mean he'll push Bell cattle in on me?"

"Just that."

"Well, thanks for the warning."

Kate shook her head. "It's not a warning," she said. "I wouldn't want you or anyone else to think that I've tipped my father's hand. I'm merely saying that a showdown is bound to come. And for your information, Vance, I'll be on John Belden's side when the chips are down."

"I wouldn't expect anything else," he told her. "But you'd be doing him a favor if you keep him from forcing the showdown. I'll tell you this, Miss Belden—I'll fight when he pushes his cattle through the Frios. But I won't fool around fighting Matt Yarnell and the Bell hands."

"I know. You'll come gunning for John Belden."

"Make him understand that, for his own sake."

"I won't even try," she said. "It would do no good, to begin with. And he would think I was taking sides with you. That would make him fly into a rage. He's not forgiven me for coming into George Worden's saloon the day you fought that Mexican. He believes that I came in there to keep him and the Bell hands from taking sides against you."

"And did you?"

Kate ignored that.

Vance said, "I didn't think you'd be afraid of the old rannihan."

"I've reason to be afraid of him."

"How so?"

"I've been out here only a year," Kate said. "Before that I lived with a family in San Antonio, since the time my mother died. I had to write a dozen coaxing letters before he permitted me to come to Bell. He feels that this country is no place for a woman. He's threatened to send me packing if I take your part again—not that I ever did, mind you. Anyway, that's why I'm afraid of him. I don't want to be sent back to San Antonio. I like living at Bell Ranch too much." She lifted the roan's reins, kneed it into motion.

Vance rode with her, saying, "If you were sent away on my account, I'd probably have George Worden for an enemy." He spoke banteringly, but behind his words was a lively curiosity about this girl. He'd always wondered about her, each time he saw her. This was their second encounter, but he still did not understand her. He added, "But you could, of course, keep from being sent back by marrying George."

"When I marry anyone, it will be because I've made up my mind to," she said sharply, "not because I'm hunting a way out of something unpleasant."

"Sorry. I guess I did speak out of turn."

"You did. I no more want you prying into my affairs than you want me on your side of the Frios."

He grimaced. "I deserved that," he said. "Let's call it quits, eh?"

"Call it quits is right," Kate said. "And there's no need for you to ride with me. I can find my way off Spur range—and you can bet on it that I won't be back!" She lifted the roan to a lope, left Vance behind.

He pulled up and gazed after her wonderingly. She was more than a little touchy about George Worden. In fact, his mention of Worden had riled her up to a surprising degree. That struck him as odd, for a girl shouldn't mind being chided about a suitor.

He began to suspect that Worden's chances of winning her weren't too good. That was too bad, for Kate Belden was quite a girl, and one of these days she would be quite a woman. All she needed was a little more growing up. Yes, it was too bad for George Worden—if the merchant's chances were as slim as Vance thought them.

Vance didn't quite know how he himself felt toward Kate. He saw the promise of her, but she did not arouse in him the aching need that Claire Avery did. Thought of the older woman brought with it a sense of guilt, and, as he turned back toward headquarters, he told himself that he must keep her out of his thoughts.

He loafed along at a slow walk on the way back, thinking now not of either woman but of the very real danger to Spur. Dan Avery would probably sell out if John Belden made him an attractive offer. And even if the tenderfoot didn't sell, it was a certainty that Belden would before long try to move a Bell herd through the Frios and onto Spur. The danger was real; it was something to worry about. But that was forgotten as he came within sight of his buildings.

Spur ranchyard was swarming with horsemen. Sombreroed riders with bandoliers across their chests, six-shooters at their thighs, and rifles on their saddles. He had seen such horsemen once before, the day Presido was terrorized. They were Mexican bandits. Jose Durango had come calling.

THEY'D come in from the south while Vance rode with Kate Belden, two dozen riders with a string of pack mules. A voice within him seemed to shout, "Run, Vance, run!" But it was already too late. A half dozen of the band came racing toward him. They crowded in on him, one taking his rifle and another his revolver. They forced him to ride into the ranchyard, to where Jose Durango sat his horse.

Perhaps the man had once cut a fine enough figure to seduce the daughter of a *haciendado,* but now he was grossly fat and as ugly as the profession he followed. He pointed at Vance with his quirt, baring his teeth in a grin that was like the grimace of a well-gorged lobo.

"You do not beg for your life, *hombre*?"

"I'd make a poor beggar, Durango."

"Ah, but a man does not always know his talents."

"Mine don't run in that direction, I tell you."

Durango laughed. He glanced toward the ranchhouse, and Vance now saw that Dan and Claire Avery stood in its doorway. The bandit said, "Maybe it is because of the woman that you do not beg. Maybe for her you play the *bravo,* no?"

"The woman is nothing to me. She has a man."

"He does not look like much of a man, that one. But maybe you are not much of a man, either, for all your brave talk. It could be that you tell yourself that this Jose Durango does not dare take your life because this is Texas and not Mexico."

"I tell myself nothing."

"Then I will tell you something, gringo."

"Go ahead. I can't stop you."

"I am not going to kill you. What do you think of that?"

Vance regarded him warily. The heavily jowled face with its thick black mustache was bland, the beady black eyes amused. Shrugging, Vance said, "I think I'll have to take you at your word, Durango."

The bandit roared with laughter. It was echoed by chuckles from some of his ragtag followers. Then, sobering, he said, "No, I am not going to kill you. I promised Don Luis that I would leave you for him. He is with the doctor who heals his hand. When the hand is healed, he will come here and I will let him cut your heart out. So you have a little longer to live, gringo. A little longer."

"Thanks," Vance said, "for nothing."

"When you knifed Don Luis, you defied me. You did not know he was under my protection?"

"No."

"The law says that ignorance is no excuse."

"So you're the law, are you?"

"Where I ride, there is no law but the word of Jose Durango. Whoever goes against my word must be punished so that others do not go against it." Durango gestured with his quirt. "Get down off your horse, gringo."

Vance's face turned rocky, but then, after a moment of hestitation, he swung from the saddle. Durango spoke an order in Spanish and two of his men dismounted and closed in on Vance. His arms were seized and pinned behind him. Durango waited until he was securely held, then dismounted and came to face him.

He said, "I cannot have it known that a man defies Jose Durango and goes unpunished," and with the quirt lashed at Vance's face.

Vance wrenched violently against the men holding him, trying to duck the blow. He was held too firmly. The quirt struck him along the left side of the face, and the pain was knife sharp. A second blow fell, this to the right side. A scream rose in his throat, but he

throttled it there by clenching his teeth.

Durango said, "That is for harming one under my protection, gringo!"

Vance shouted, "Your illegitimate son, you mean!"

Durango cursed, lashed him again. Vance tore loose from one of his captors, tried to fling himself at the bandit *jefe,* but the second man jerked him off balance and dropped him to his knees. The man who had lost his hold now stepped forward, gun in hand. The weapon swung up, clubbed down, and its barrel struck Vance at the base of the skull. There was an explosion of pain. No one held him now, and he fell forward and sprawled face down in the dirt.

He lay there, numbed by pain but not quite unconscious, until they dragged him to the barn and shut him inside. A little later they opened the door to shove Mario into the building with him. He paid no attention to this, for he was too badly dazed. He lay where he'd been dropped, waiting for his mind to clear and the throbbing pain to ease. It was an hour before he was able to force himself to a sitting position.

Mario turned from the door, where he'd been peering through a crack. "You are all right now, Will?"

"I will be. Can you see what's going on out there?"

"Most of them are gone to Estrella with the mules. Durango and six others are still here. One stands guard outside. The others are in the bunkhouse."

"So he meant it," Vance said. "He's waiting for Aragon."

Aragon and his knife . . . Involuntarily, Vance shuddered.

(To be continued in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. See if you can match the following numerals with their proper western connotations: (A) 101, (B) 54-40, (C) 44-40, (D) '73— (1) Proposed Canadian boundary in 1884. (2) An early model Winchester (3) A famous ranch brand. (4) A saddle rifle caliber.

2. "Roy Rogers" is the pseudonym of a western actor whose real name is which of these: Rogers–Anderson, Roy Leonardo, or Leonard Slye?

3. At the time of his death on the Little Big Horn, Custer was 27, 37, 47 or 57 years old?

4. The first "horse opera" movie was filmed about 1909 at La Mesa, Calif.; Long Island, N. Y.; Hollywood, Calif.; or Durango, Colo.?

5. The cowboy star of this early movie was Tom Mix; Art Acord; Wm. S. Hart; or Bronco Billy Anderson?

6. "Tucumcari" and "Tumacacori" are western jawbreakers. What and where are they?

7. The .45 cartridge is so called because (1) the powder charge is 45 grains, (2) its diameter is 45/100ths of an inch, or (3) the lead bullet weighs 45 grams?

8. The Sandia Indian Pueblo, the Sandia Mountains and the Sandia Base of the Atomic Energy Commission are all located near Albuquerque, New Mexico. Sandia (pronounced Sahn-DEE-ah) is a Spanish word meaning: watermelon, sandy, holy day, or lizard?

9. Which of these well-known Western cities lies the farthest west, geographically: Walla Walla, Wash.; Reno, Nev.; Santa Barbara, Calif.; Needles, Ariz.?

10. Are grizzly bears tailless, like humans?

——Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 87. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

BETRAYAL

By J. L. Bouma

CONSTANCE GREER emerged from her father's store as Fred Stacy dismounted and looped reins around the hitch rack. "I'm glad you came in," she said, and put a hand on his arm. "Sheriff Dobkin wants to see you."

"I know," Stacy said, and noted that Constance looked extremely anxious. "I suppose it has to do with Danny."

"Have you heard what happened?"

"Danny stopped by the mill yesterday while I was out checking timber," Stacy said. "He picked up some grub, and Matt said he acted worried. What's it all about?"

DANNY CARLSON needed help . . . but even Connie couldn't find out why

"He's in some kind of trouble," Constance said. She was a slender, dark-eyed girl, and Stacy had to avert his gaze from the pain he saw in those eyes. He knew how Constance still felt about Danny Carlson, though her romance with him had long since ended. Though Stacy and Constance had spoken of getting married, he knew she had kept putting him off because of Danny.

"What kind of trouble?" he asked.

"I'd rather the sheriff told you."

"But you know about it, is that right?"

"Not exactly, but I know it's bad trouble," Constance said. "Danny disappeared three days ago, so I went to Sheriff Dobkin yesterday, and he wouldn't say anything except that Danny was in trouble and had run away. I won't believe it, Fred."

"Well, we'll see," Stacy said, and looked along the street of log and false-fronted buildings. It was a gray day. Mist hid the tops of the mountains that rose steeply and abruptly on either side of the town. Fall snapped in the air. "I'd better go see what the sheriff has to say," Stacy said.

"Oh, I hope it's good news," Constance said.

Stacy smiled and murmured, "It can't be too bad. After all, Danny is Dobkin's deputy."

He strode along the boardwalk to the corner. Opposite, three miners in bulky clothing were talking in front of Gibson's saloon and gambling parlor. An ore wagon rumbled past on its way to the stamp mill. Stacy crossed over to Sheriff Jay Dobkin's office, and found Dobkin checking a stack of wanted bills. The sheriff was a blocky man of fifty. He had been a law officer throughout the Southwest and the Rocky Mountain district most of his life, and as such had earned a reputation for toughness.

He looked up and said, "Figured you might be in today, else I'd have taken a ride out to your sawmill."

"What's on your mind?"

"It's about Danny," Dobkin said. "Now this is bound to surprise you, but facts are something you can't argue against. Danny staged a holdup Wednesday evening."

"What!"

"I know how you feel," Dobkin said gruffly, "and I hate saying my deputy turned bad. But it's a fact. I guess you know Gene Gibson opened up a saloon in Belden a few months ago, don't you?"

Stacy nodded. "I heard about it."

"Well, last Wednesday evening he and his houseman, the fellow they call Howard, were driving back with around five hundred dollars from the Belden saloon. They were held up and robbed this side of the ridge. The holdup man wore a mask, but both the victims swore it was Danny."

"Where was Danny supposed to be at the time?"

"Hell, the way he kept galivanting around, I never knew where he was half the time," Dobkin said, looking at Stacy with his veiled old lawman's eyes. "He'd supposedly been out trying to get a line on the gang that's been holding up stages lately, but I don't know. Anyhow, I talked Gibson and Howard into keeping quiet about what happened, on account of I wanted to talked to Danny first. I always liked the boy."

"He thought a lot of you."

Dobkin stared at his desk. "I know that," he said in a low voice, and sighed. "Well, he didn't show, so I went to his cabin and looked around, and sure enough I found the money hidden in a jar."

"How do you know it was Gibson's money?" Stacy asked. "It might've been money he saved."

Dobkin raised bitter eyes. "On a deputy's pay?" he said, and snorted disgustedly. "Look at me. I've worn a badge since I can remember, and what with the salaries they expect a man to live on, I've never been able to save that much myself." He stared at the window. "Anyhow, I waited at the cabin, and when Danny finally showed I told him the facts."

Stacy felt sick. "Did he admit it?"

"Wouldn't say one way or the other. So I told him to make himself scarce until I found out what Gibson meant to do. Well, Gibson turned out to be reasonable. Since he got his money back, he's willing to forget the whole thing."

"I never took him to be a reasonable man," Stacy said. And then he added, "What have I got to do with all this?"

"You and Danny are old friends. He worked at your sawmill before I swore him in as a deputy. And he and Constance—"

"Let's leave her out of it," Stacy said.

"All right, all right. It's just that I've been trying to keep this business as quiet as possible for her sake," Dobkin said gruffly. "Do you know where Danny might be hiding out?" he asked, and smiled thinly. "Or maybe you've seen him lately?"

"No."

DOBKIN studied Stacy closely. "Well, I haven't been able to find him," he said. So if you happen to cut his trail, you might tell him it's okay to forget the whole thing. And you might also tell him I don't want him in my district. I'm having too much trouble with this gang of outlaws to spend time worrying about a crooked deputy."

"Seems to me you're taking a lot for granted," Stacy said.

"That's my business," Dobkin told him curtly.

"Sure," Stacy murmured, and went out.

He walked back to the corner, hesitated, and then crossed over to Gibson's saloon. He went inside and stood there a little while, a wide-shouldered man in a plaid mackinaw and black hat. The place had few customers at this hour. Four or five miners and a lone cowpuncher were scattered along the bar. Then Stacy's eyes toughened as he saw Gibson and the burly Howard back by the gambling layout.

Stacy walked over to them. "I just had a talk with Dobkin," he said.

Gibson nodded and smiled, a slim man who wore a brocaded vest beneath his box coat. "I thought it was the best way to handle the unpleasant business."

"Are you two sure it was Danny that robbed you?"

"You talked to the sheriff, didn't you?" Howard demanded malevolently. "What more do you want?"

Stacy glanced coldly and briefly at the burly houseman. Then he turned back to Gibson and said, "Well, what about an answer?"

"It's not easy to accuse a man of robbery," Gibson said easily, "especially when you've known him for some time. That should be answer enough." He smiled. "Anyhow, since I'm willing to forget what happened, why talk about it at all?"

"Danny's your friend, isn't he?" Howard said, and grinned evilly. "So you wouldn't want us to change our minds and sign a complaint against him, would you? Just think of what that would do to Greer's girl. It might even get folks to thinking that she had a hand in it."

Stacy caught the man's vest and jerked him close. Through set teeth he said, "Either take that back or you and I tangle right now."

"Do as he says," Gibson said. "What's the matter with you? You had no call to say what you did."

Blood mottled Howard's cheeks. "I didn't mean anything by it," he muttered. "Can't a man make a joke?"

Stacy gave him a contemptuous shove, then turned to Gibson. "I aim to hear what Danny has to say, and if his story doesn't agree with yours, you'll hear from me."

He turned on his heel and strode out of the place.

Constance was writing in a ledger, in her father's small office, when Stacy entered the store. She said quickly, "What did Sheriff Dobkin have to say, Fred?"

It was best that she know, Stacy thought, and told her about the holdup. Outrage made her eyes sparkle. When he finished she said, "I don't believe it. Mr. Gibson and Howard must've been mistaken. Why, Danny just wouldn't commit a crime, if only because of the way he feels about Sheriff Dobkin. You know how he's always admired the sheriff. Danny's tried so hard to be a good deputy. That's one reason he spent so much time tracking the gang that's been holding up stages around here. He knew the sheriff has been worried about those holdups, and he wanted to prove he was worth his salt."

Danny Carlson, at twenty-three, was getting a little old to be hero-worshipping a sheriff, Stacy thought. He said, "There's something wrong, and that's for sure. I don't consider Danny guilty. But on the other hand, why should Gibson be lying about the holdup?"

"Do you know where to find Danny?"

"I've got an idea he might be hanging around the sawmill."

She rose. "I'm going with you, Fred."

He looked at her and nodded slowly. "I've

got a few errands to do, and then I'll leave. You'd better wait a half-hour before you ride out. And make sure you're not being followed."

"But why should anyone follow me?"

"Maybe no one will," Stacy said. "But there's something about this business that I don't like, and there's no point in taking chances until we learn the truth."

STACY took a roundabout way to get to his sawmill, and by the time he picked up his wagon road, he was pretty certain that no one had trailed him.

It was getting late in the afternoon when he saw his log buildings in the clearing ahead. He called out Matt's name, and when there was no answer he knew his helper had taken off for his Saturday night spree in Belden, the small settlement up the canyon from Furnace Creek. Stacy off-saddled and stabled his horse in the shed.

He was forking hay to the animal when the voice said softly, "Just keep moving around, Fred. They might be watching."

Stacy glanced up and saw Danny crouched in the small loft, a rifle across his knees. He saw the wild, bitter grin on the bony young face, and he murmured, "You sure someone's watching the place?"

"I'm not taking any chances."

"Where's your horse?"

"Back in the trees.

"I just talked to the sheriff. You have nothing to worry about. Gibson's forgetting the whole thing." Stacy spread the hay in the bin. "Did you stage that holdup, Danny?"

"No. They framed me." The bitter disturbance was in Danny's voice, too, and his eyes held a mean glitter. "But they're not getting away with it."

"Why should anyone want to frame you?"

Danny hesitated. Then he muttered, "Because I know too much."

"About what?"

"Never mind."

"Be sensible," Stacy said, getting a little angry. "If you're not guilty, it's up to you to clear yourself. What's wrong with you, man!"

"Not a damn thing," Danny said. "Maybe there was, but there isn't now. I've learned my lesson."

"Sheriff Dobkin told me—"

"The hell with the sheriff!" Danny exploded, and there was anguish in the way he spoke. "The hell with him, you hear me? I'm leaving here in a few days, but meantime I have to eat. I'm damn near starved right now."

"I'll unlatch the back door and you can sneak in," Stacy said.

He entered the bunkhouse and unlatched the back door. There was a cut of roast venison in the cooler, and he sliced bread and made sandwiches. By the time Danny came inside, Stacy had coffee on to boil. Danny took one of the sandwiches and began to eat ravenously.

"Now what's all this nonsense?" Stacy asked him.

"It's not nonsense," Danny said, "and I'd just as soon not talk about it."

"Danny, you don't make sense."

"Don't aim to." Danny broke off as the sound of hoofs reached them. He grabbed his rifle and backed to the rear door. "Who is it?" he whispered harshly.

"Don't get excited," Stacy said. He took his Colt from a cupboard, shoved it under his belt, and opened the door. "It's Connie," he said.

It was getting pretty dark under the trees as she swung down and tied her horse. She came forward quickly and said, "Is he here, Fred?"

Stacy jerked his head, and she entered. He heard her say, "Danny—" He closed the door and walked slowly over to the long lumber shed, thinking that Danny hadn't made much sense. What was the kid so bitter and upset about?

Stacy walked around the place to check that everything was all right, in case of more rain, but his mind wasn't on his work. He took tobacco from his shirt pocket and rolled a cigarette, thinking of Connie in there with Danny. He was about to light his smoke when he saw two horsemen drift in sight through the trees.

He dropped the cigarette and stepped forward, calling, "Evening men. Is there something I can do for you?"

The two riders had a bulky look to them, and their hat brims were pulled low. One

of them said, "I reckon we kind of lost our way, friend."

"Where you heading?"

"Belden," the fellow said, eyeing Connie's horse.

Stacy wasn't sure, but he thought he heard a sound at the back door. He said, "Turn back the way you came and then swing right at the forks. The left fork leads to Furnace Creek, the other one'll take you up canyon to Belden."

"Thanks," the fellow murmured, and glanced at his partner. Both men, Stacy saw now, wore short beards. He waited for them

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DRESS REVERSAL

By S. OMAR BARKER

It's nice to compliment your wife
Upon her dress, I'm told—
But if you value limb and life,
Keep quiet when it's old!

---

to turn their horses and ride off. Just then Connie came outside and said crisply, "I'll have to be going, Fred, else Dad'll worry."

"I'll ride in with you," Stacy said. To the two riders he said, "You got about a five-mile ride from here to Belden."

"Thanks," one of them said, and now both men turned their horses and rode away.

FRED STACY saddled his horse. When he came from the shed Connie was already mounted, and they rode out stirrup to stirrup. Connie said, "Who were those men?"

"They lost their way," Stacy said. And then he asked, "What did Danny have to say?"

"He said everything was far from straightened out. Fred, he's bitter and upset about something. I've never seen him like this. He acted as if he didn't have a friend left in the world."

"Did he say he'd be back?"

"He wouldn't say."

When they came to the forks, Stacy pulled rein and listened hard. He heard, very faintly, the sound of receding hoofs.

Connie said worriedly, "What are we going to do if he won't let us help him, Fred?"

"Let him help himself," Stacy said.

"No. Not the way he feels now."

Stacy drew a shaky breath. He slapped the pommel with the flat of his hand. "Listen to me," he said. "Everything we are and have worked for is coming to a head. Do you realize that? Nothing lasts unless we make it last. Those two settlements in the canyon won't last. Two, three years from now, when the mines peter out, there won't be any towns. Your father, myself, all the men that've made money out of the ground directly or indirectly, will be moving on. And I want you to move in my direction, with me. That's what I've been building toward all these past years. This, that we have, is something we can make last for the rest of our lives. But it won't even begin to last, it will peter out like the mines, if you keep worrying about Danny."

He leaned over and gripped her arm, seeing the pale blur of her face. Then he saw it turn from him, and he said flatly, "All right, I will help him. I'll do what I can. But you'll have to make up your mind between us, because I won't be left dangling. Neither do I want you if you're going to be thinking and worrying about another man. So make up your mind."

He swung his horse and rode back to the mill. This time he did not unsaddle his mount, but only tied it in the shed. He said, "Danny!" and went to the bunkhouse, where he lighted a lamp. A moment later, the back door opened and Danny slid inside.

"I figured you might come back," he said, grinning. "I also figured those two jokers would do a better job of looking for me.

Damn it, I'm still hungry."

"And, damn it, you're not going to eat until after you do a lot of explaining," Stacy said, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "Who are you to expect help from your friends if you won't tell them your troubles? Is this some sort of a game? Because if it is, I want no part of it. You have no right to worry me and Connie, do you hear? So speak up if you want my help." He closed in on Danny and gripped him roughly. "Otherwise leave here."

Danny wrenched loose and stepped back, a quick hostility in his eyes. "So that's it," he said. "You won Connie over, and now you're sick worrying that she'll come back to me. That's it, isn't it? Well, I can win her back without half trying," he said. "As for needing your help—"

Just then the door behind them burst open, and a stocky, bearded man in a canvas coat stepped inside. There was something familiar about him, Stacy thought instantly. Then a second man, a lanky fellow with a narrow jaw, followed the first man inside and heeled the door shut. Both held guns in their hands.

Danny, who had frozen, turned slowly, and the stocky man said, "Kind of fooled you, didn't we, deputy?"

Danny, his face pale, said nothing. And Stacy saw now that these two men were not the ones who had stopped by a while ago. He said, "What do you fellows want?"

"You mean the deputy hasn't told you?" the bearded man said.

Stacy said quietly, "Who are they, Danny?"

"Meeker," Danny said, indicating the stocky man. "Meeker and Smith."

Meeker, Stacy thought, and recognized the man now, having seen him often on the streets of both Furnace Creek and Belden. Meeker had been involved in a shooting not long before, and had been cleared. Stacy couldn't remember having seen Smith before.

Now Meeker said softly, "I guess you know what's gonna happen, don't you, deputy? I'm sorry about your friend, though."

"Cold turkey?" Danny's voice was unsteady.

"Cold turkey," Meeker said. "Dobkin didn't want it this way, but we have too much to lose."

Stacy said evenly, "Someone saw you here, so you'll never get away with it." He nudged Danny to one side. Danny had leaned his rifle against the wall, so that was out. "And my helper's due back any minute," he said.

LISTEN to him, Meeker said, and grinned at Smith as he thumbed back the hammer of his gun.

It was only the fragment of a second, with the rest of that second running out in action and sound. As Stacy knocked Danny aside with his left arm, his right hand dipped and gripped the butt of his Colt. He fell backward and fired at Meeker's broad chest as the bearded man pulled trigger, but Stacy's bullet crossed the short distance first.

Meeker grunted and sagged forward, and Smith yelled out as his bulging eyes darted between Stacy and Danny. That moment of indecision lasted too long, for when he shot his bullet went wild. Then a slug from Danny's rifle punched Smith in the middle and brought him down. He made an effort and rose to his knees, mouth gaping, hands clutched against his stomach. Then he spilled forward, turned completely over, and lay still.

Fred Stacy turned on Danny and said softly, "Where's your badge, kid? Why aren't you wearing your badge? Are you ashamed of it?"

Danny was staring at the bodies. Now he turned, his face rigid in the lamplight. "You guessed?"

"I'm getting an idea. Meeker was head of the outlaw gang, right?"

Danny nodded. "I got suspicious of him because he never worked and always had money to spend. And he was usually at Gibson's saloon, in Belden—he and Smith and two others. Then, after the holdup last month, they were gone for a while. And the first thing they did when they got back was to see Gibson."

"So you figured Gibson was part of the set-up, eh?"

"That's right. But I couldn't prove anything. Then, a few days ago," Danny said bitterly, "I told Dobkin what I'd learned. He said to forget it, that there was nothing to it. And the next thing I knew, Gibson had framed me on that holdup charge."

"And Dobkin told you to make yourself scarce."

"That's what got me," Danny said in that same bitter voice. "If I'd committed a crime he should have arrested me. I didn't say anything but I watched him, and as soon as he left my place he went over to talk to Gibson. I knew, then, that he was in on it. He knew when the stages shipped gold, or he could find out easy enough. Damn him!"

"You're breaking my heart," Stacy said sourly. "How old are you, kid? Haven't you learned anything yet?" Stacy jerked him around. "And just what were you fixing to do about it?"

Danny swallowed. He looked up, eyes pleading. "Sure I admired Dobkin. You know his record? He's tamed more towns than you'll ever live in. He was straight as they come. And then he turned crooked."

"And now what are you fixing to do?"

Danny wet his lips. He reached slowly in his shirt pocket and took out his badge, looked at it for a moment, then pinned it on the flap of the pocket with shaky fingers. Then his lips pressed firmly together.

"Let's go," he said.

They got their horses and rode to Furnace Creek in the darkness. The town was a double line of yellow windows as they rode along the main street.

"He's in his office," Danny said.

They dismounted and tied their horses. Danny led the way. "You sure this is the way you want to do it?" Stacy murmured. "Maybe you'd better notify the stage line manager, and send for a U. S. marshal."

"We'll do this my way," Danny said.

He opened the office door and they stepped inside. Dobkin looked up, and a startled expression crossed his face. Then all at once the flesh of his face appeared to sag, and all the light went out of his eyes.

"So it's finished," he said.

"Why did you do it, Jay?" Danny asked, his voice shaken.

"There's no point in explaining," Dobkin said. "It's done, that's all. I'm an old man past his time, an old man who's ashamed of himself for weakening because he feared the future, when no one would want him or would pay him a living wage."

"Five holdups in six months," Danny said bitterly. "Where's the money? Where's all that gold? In Gibson's safe?"

Dobkin didn't answer. He slowly unpinned his badge and tossed it on the desk. Then he rose and said mildly, "You might as well lock me up, Danny."

"Damn you, you framed me!"

"I wanted you out of the country," Dobkin said. "I didn't want you to hang around and get killed."

"Meeker tried it, and Meeker's dead," Stacy said.

"I figured so," Dobkin said.

"Get out of here!" Danny blurted. "Get on your horse and ride."

Dobkin looked at him. "That's not what a good law officer would tell me. And you can be a good one, Danny."

DANNY took a shaky breath. "Good enough to go after Gibson," he said, and walked out.

Outside, Stacy said, "Better take it easy. Gibson isn't gonna run."

"I'll handle him," Danny said shortly, and started along the street, saying, "You stay back."

"I'll just tag along," Stacy said.

The saloon was crowded, and there were the odors of whisky and damp clothing. Smoke drifted sluggishly in the lamplight. Their entrance caused a little silence to settle in the room. Men glanced at Danny's set face, at the grim line of his jaw, and then they glanced at each other and drifted out of his way. He strode on, his hard gaze moving across the big room.

Then Danny's gaze became fixed, and Stacy saw Gibson and Howard step away from the end of the bar. They looked at Danny, looked at Stacy, and then Danny spoke.

"Gibson, you and Howard are both under arrest for passing information you got from Dobkin to Meeker and his men—about payloads hauled by the stage line."

"What's this?" Gibson's voice shook with outrage. "Why, damn you, you're the one that held me up and robbed me."

"It won't work," Danny said. "Meeker and Smith are dead, Gibson. And Dobkin just got done talking."

"He's lying!" Howard said in a loud voice. "It was Carlson here who held us up and robbed us Wednesday evening. Dobkin found the money in his shack."

"After you put it there." It was Dobkin. He stood just inside the side door, and his face was gray in that light. "It's finished, Howard," he said.

"Why, you damned old—" Howard began.

His right arm jerked, and then a gun appeared in his hand. Men scrambled away at the roar of the shot. The bullet thunked into Dobkin, and he swayed slowly forward, his hand clawing for his gun.

Danny and Stacy went for their guns as Howard turned, smoke curling from the muzzle of his weapon. Dobkin straightened with an effort and shot Howard through the body. Then he dropped his gun and pitched forward on his face.

Gibson, who had turned to run, stopped as Stacy's gun centered on him. He raised his hands slowly and said, "Well, a man can't win all the time."

"You were on the losing side from the beginning," Stacy told him.

Danny was bending over Dobkin's body. Now he straightened. "He's dead, Fred. And strangely enough I'm glad. I have an idea he started to die the minute he turned crooked, and this was his best way out."

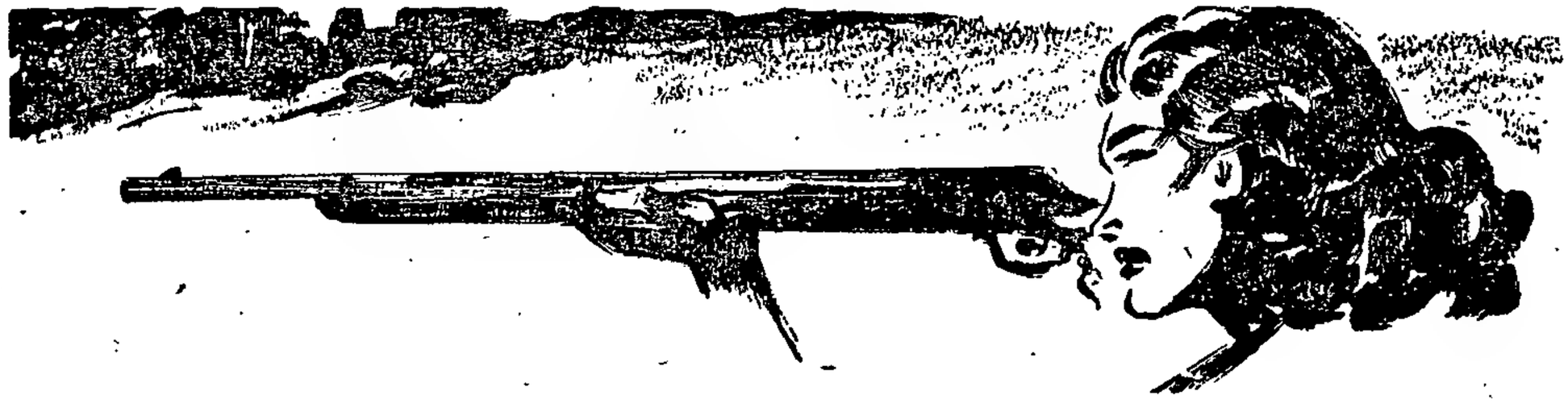
"It was," Stacy agreed.

"He was a great law officer," Danny said, and smiled. "But like he said, it's finished. Now go see Connie, Fred. Tell her I'm all right. She'll understand."

"I know she will," Fred Stacy said.

He shouldered his way through the crowd outside and hurried along the street, and he was thinking, yes, she'll understand. And what we have now will grow and keep growing.

He was smiling broadly as he quickened his pace.



Coming up in the next issue

Crossover

Walt Gallatin hadn't started out bad . . . but it was getting easier all the time to forgive evil, if the pay was right

A Magazine-Length Novel

By KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

No Drifter Wanted

Lansing would kill for Jane, but he drew the line at one thing . . . and even his love for her couldn't change his mind

An Exciting Novelette

By WILL COTTON

"Nobody but you'd steal a man's living!" Shepherd snarled

Face of Danger

By Fred Grove

TERRELL KINDER rose from his chair by the rolltop desk and made a restless circle around the log-walled room. He did not know when the day had gone wrong for him, but somehow it had. He returned to the desk, his high bootheels resounding in the empty house, and stared down with distaste at the pile of thick ranch ledgers. Stirred by a deep discontent, he turned to the elkhorn rack to reach for his hat.

A moment later he dropped his hand. There was no time today for loping across country with old Fargo, his ranch hand. Reluctantly, he sat down with the records again, but his mind was wandering. Then he heard a horse hammer across the yard and stop quickly.

TERRELL WAS LOSING the woman he loved, because he couldn't change . . . he still believed a man should fight for his land

Terrell winced. Only one man rode in such a punishing fashion—Ennis Buell, the Indian agent at War Bonnet. Buell pushed open the door and came abruptly inside, not bothering to knock. Irritation touched Terrell, not so much at the absence of manners as at the man himself, with his infernal brusqueness. Then he relented as quickly. It was a small thing; any other day Terrell wouldn't have minded.

"A drink?" he offered, rising.

"Too early in the day." Buell was well-dressed for this part of the Territory, almost dapper in dove-gray shirt, string tie and broadcloth coat. He was a man of about thirty, several years younger than Terrell; slender and yet hard-knit, his neck thick and his hands strong and quick.

Terrell could not help recalling the simple, dedicated Quaker agent whom Buell had succeeded, and instantly decided the comparison was unfair. Buell had proved himself efficient in tribal range matters.

"Drumming up some late lease bidders?" Terrell asked.

"Hardly necessary," Buell answered in his blunt manner. "Out checking tribal range. No, you'd be bidder enough to take over Gibb Shepherd's lease. Not that he won't make some sort of bid himself. He's eager to renew, since it's his salt and bacon."

"It would be, if he managed well," said Terrell, with a trace of old heat.

"Shouldn't be hard for you to top his bid. Shepherd's near broke, and you have one of the best ranches going." Buell smiled briefly. "Naturally, your high figure will please me."

"The sky's the limit," Terrell said curtly. "I'll beat anything Shepherd offers. I haven't forgotten a few things—like missing beef."

"You're coming in to the agency, then?"

Terrell nodded, wondering why Buell even asked. "I'll be in town till the sale's over. But my attorney, Bert McGrath, will bid me in. I'm shunning the agency today—" Terrell caught himself. He'd spoken the last without thinking, not aware until now that he intended to avoid Shepherd.

"Oh." A flicker of surprise showed in Buell's freshly-shaven face.

"It's easier. I don't hunt trouble."

"Of course not. But for a man of your reputation as a fighter—"

"I'd hate to shoot Shepherd," explained Terrell, matter of factly. "I had my fill of gunplay some years ago."

"That was before my time," said Buell, quietly interested.

"Yes. We cleaned out these hills good. We shot and hanged some cow thieves, and some we sent to the pen—men like Nels Ivy, who really deserved hanging too." Terrell broke off, annoyed to find himself speaking of certain long-buried events in which he took no personal pride.

"This Ivy," Buell asked casually, "was he much of a man?"

"Tough, if you mean that. Real handy with a gun." Terrell stopped. He'd talk no more of the past.

Buell appeared to sense it. He stepped briskly to the door. "Three o'clock at the agency," he reminded, going out.

"McGrath knows. He'll be there."

Coming out to the rambling porch, cool and shaded under the blazing sun, Terrell watched Buell mount and ride off at a hard gallop.

Old Fargo loomed near, a thin, gaunt figure, like a relic from the savage days of the past. Terrell knew the old watchdog had been posted outside all the time, in needless vigilance, ready if called.

With hawk's eyes, old Fargo squinted after Buell. "Poor way to treat horseflesh," he snorted.

Terrell smiled without speaking. An affection linked them, though it was never mentioned. "We're going to town pretty soon," Terrell announced, and went inside to wrestle with the ledgers again.

An hour later, he picked his hat off the horns and by habit reached for the worn cartridge belt, oiled holster and pistol. Settling them to his lank hips with wide-knuckled hands, his morning's depression returned. He didn't like what he saw of himself this moment—a leftover from the sudden, violent times, maybe outgrowing his own usefulness.

In early afternoon, seeing War Bonnet below in a fold of the limestone hills, Terrell had a sweeping view of this rolling grass country. It still looked largely open, but he

noted more windmills and houses now in the distance, and fences pressing a man in.

He'd made a small fortune here, in the space of ten years after leaving Texas, buying range when he could, leasing from the Indian reserves, and fighting when necessary, during the stormy beginning. Of late, more Texans had moved in, and more trainloads of Lone Star cattle headed north each year to summer and winter upon the lush graze.

Yet, glancing at old Fargo, who still packed his single-action pistol, Terrell realized most of the fun had gone. Now, in the inflexible old man riding beside him, he could see Terrell Kinder in the coming years—alone, a Spanish horse penned tight, still unruly, still fighting the bit and therefore doomed because of it.

They stabled their horses at Joel Creed's livery and started up the plank walk, past the wagon yard, toward the Cattle King hotel. Old Fargo roved his suspicious gaze along the street, across the scattering of tied saddle horses before the hitching racks.

"Never did like the smell of this town," he growled.

"We can wait at the hotel," Terrell said, "till McGrath buys that lease."

OLD FARGO paced on before he spoke. "I've never been much of a hand to tell a man his own game. But are you sure we need more range, Terrell?"

"Why not? We can use it. It's good business."

"Business!" Old Fargo shook his head. "Everything's sure cold business these days, isn't it? There's no fight or frolic left any more."

"The old days are gone," Terrell admitted. "We both know it."

Old Fargo's head snapped up. "Trouble is, does the other fellow? I've seen men get killed for less than a lease."

Each seemed to let the talk die by common consent, but Terrell knew Fargo hadn't finished his say. As they came to the hotel entrance, Fargo pulled back. "You go ahead. I believe I'll visit around."

Before Terrell could protest, old Fargo had turned and was walking up the street.

His sudden leaving disturbed Terrell. Frowning, he entered the hotel lobby. A voice calling his name, a woman's voice, made him glance around.

Leigh Richmond stood just a step beyond a slim-bodied young woman whose full lips and frank eyes were smiling at him. Her father was Colonel DeWitt Richmond, a Texas cattleman who had come here to live during the past year.

"I've been waiting for you," said Leigh Richmond, taking his arm.

"Waiting?"

"Yes. I knew you'd be in town. Lease day, isn't it?"

He stared. It struck him as a little odd. "So it is. But—"

Her hand tightened. "Terrell, I have to talk to you."

"That serious, is it?" he asked, chuckling. "My pleasure. Do you want to talk here?"

"Upstairs. Father's there."

Around her he felt different; changed. Her presence always affected him keenly. He sensed a feeling between them and knew he'd delayed too long, somehow unsure of himself.

When they entered the room, Colonel Richmond, tall and angular, rose to shake hands. "Glad to see you, Terrell. I've business to tend to, Leigh. You'll have to excuse me. Terrell, we don't see enough of you. You must be working too hard."

"There's a lot to do, Colonel."

"Most of it will keep. When you reach my age you'll understand." Colonel Richmond studied Terrell a moment and seemed uncomfortable. "Please be considerate of Leigh. I'm aware that she speaks out of turn." He left the room.

Curious, Terrell turned, to find Leigh appraising him uncertainly. She stood rather tall and her straight blue-black hair, knotted at the nape of her neck, accented the smoky grayness of her wide-set eyes. Her mouth was firm, yet full and alive below the rounded contours of her high cheeks.

She was no halfway woman, he thought, admiring her. Strong-willed, she had a moving, inner sweetness—and also a capacity for temper and scorn, if need be. Seeing her thus, he wondered why he'd held back from her

"Father's right," she said. "It's none of my business."

He understood suddenly. "You mean the lease?"

"Yes. Is it so important to you, Terrell?"

"The land's not Shepherd's," he replied steadily. "It's Indian graze, open to the highest bidder."

"I know that. But it's his living. If he loses it, he's out of business."

"He can bid for it, can't he?"

"He doesn't stand a chance against you. You know that."

He admitted it silently, and held his tongue.

"Oh, Terrell, you're a big man. He's small; always will be, I suppose. I want you to stay big—in yourself."

"Leigh, there's one thing maybe you don't know about." His voice grew harsh. "Shepherd's a thief, a common cow thief."

She met his gaze, quiet and searching. "You have proof?"

"The Association checked him. He served time in Kansas."

"I mean," she persisted, "that he stole your cattle?"

"I never missed stock till he leased next to me. It fits pretty close."

"But you aren't sure."

He spoke fast, impatiently. "There's not enough proof to bring charges, but I've lost several steers. My men found horns and bones. He's just a rawhide rancher. We used to shoot his kind before there was any law. I don't want him near my range."

FEELING flashed across her face. She stepped forward, lifting a slim, restraining hand, until she stood very close and he caught her faint, heady fragrance. "Terrell, please! Didn't it ever occur to you that's why he left Kansas—to start over again, here, in the Territory? Please, listen. Last winter I stayed with Mrs. Shepherd when she had her last baby. They've nothing, not a thing. The freeze just about wiped them out."

"Every rancher lost cattle," Terrell said coldly. "Shepherd's just a poor manager, that's all. And if he was so hard put, why didn't he speak up? We'd have all helped—even me."

Her face turned soft, her large eyes pleading. "I'd never have known if I hadn't happened by his ranch. You have your pride, and Gibb Shepherd has his. Perhaps he was too proud to ask for help."

"There was no need to, you mean, when he could live off his neighbors' stock."

Her long fingers dug into his arms. "You don't understand, do you, Terrell? I'm trying to keep you from doing something you'll regret the rest of your life—if you turn that family out."

"You make it sound brutal, Leigh. But I can't bow under. A thief's a thief."

"Terrell," she said, shaking her dark head, "you can't."

"Look here, Leigh," he answered impatiently, "I refuse to let this come between us. I've fooled around long enough." He took her by the shoulders, and the touch of her ripped through him. "I own a big ranch, a big house, but it's empty. It needs a woman. Let me take you to it. Then we'll travel the country, St. Louis, New Orleans, New York."

Almost imperceptibly, he felt her stiffen. "Is that what you think I'd like, Terrell? A great ranch, a good time, nothing more?"

"Why—" Taken aback, he strained to speak. The unaccustomed words seemed to stick in his throat. "That's just part of it," he said awkwardly. "I—you know—"

Leigh Richmond shook off his hands. "Last night a man rode out to the ranch. He told me he loved me and he asked me to marry him."

"Who?" His anger flared up before he could stamp it out. "Who dared say that?"

"I'll never tell you." She appeared to grow taller, defiant and scornful. "Because if I did you'd kill him!"

"Did he kiss you—like this?"

In a single step he reached out and took her, his arms rough. He kissed her hard, forcing her head back. She made no resistance, but neither did she meet his lips. Her body felt like so much putty in his arms.

He released her and stood back, suddenly shamed. He continued to stare at her, jarred by a sudden realization. He'd want to break any man who touched her and took her from him, and yet violence would never work with

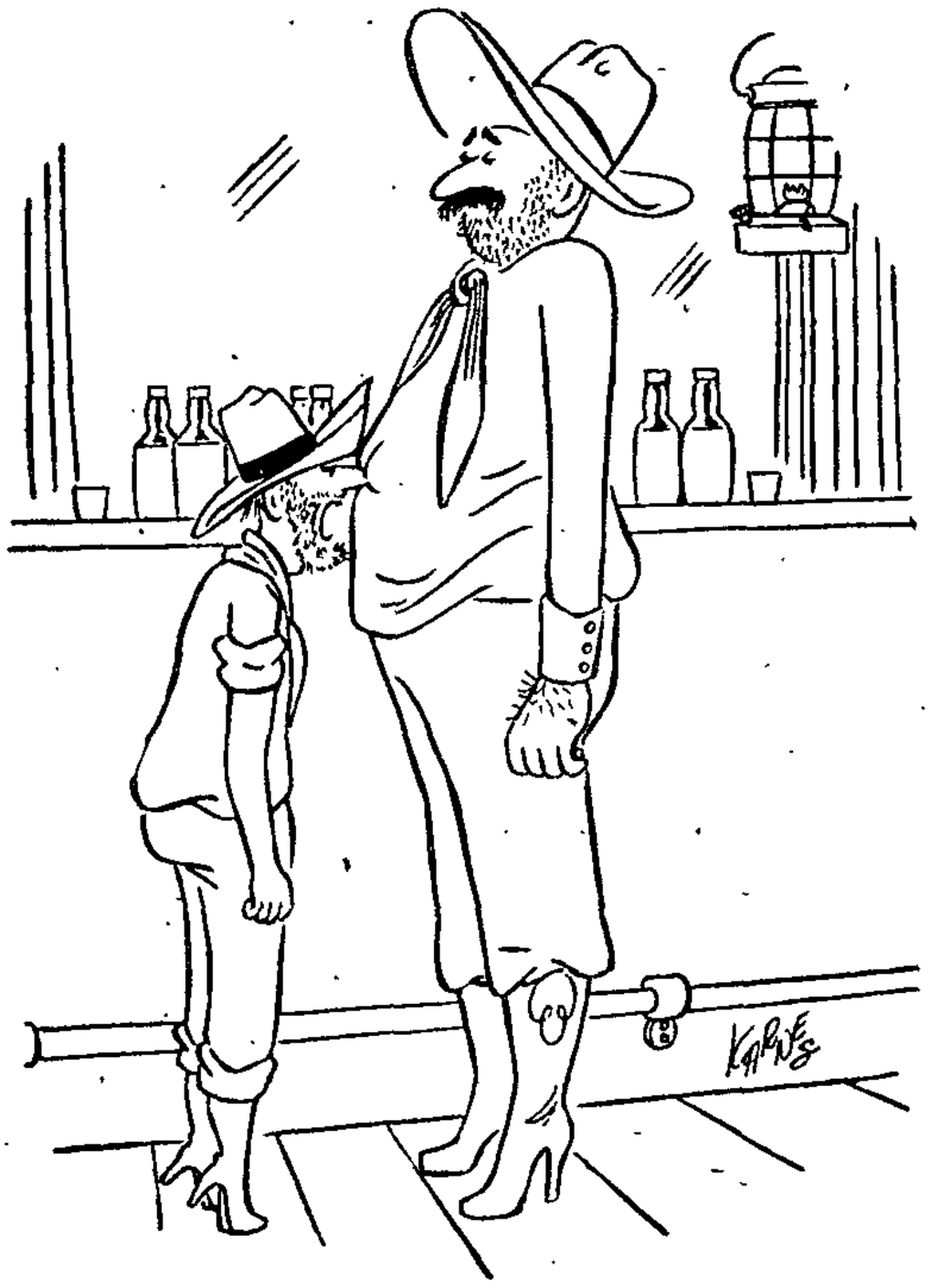
her. Now all his anger was gone and he felt only a shaken humbleness, which he could not express to her for the life of him. Slowly, without speaking, he found his hat and went to the door.

"Terrell."

He turned and heard her ask in the quietest of voices, "Is that all you intend to tell me?"

"It is. I know where I stand now."

He opened the door, and again her voice



"Sez you!"

pulled at him. "You're going through with the lease?"

He gave a quick nod.

"Terrell," she said coldly, "for obvious reasons, no man has ever told you what you are —what you've become. But I will, even though it's too late." She was trembling. She took a deep breath and said firmly, "You're hard and unforgiving. You came here when a man had to fight to exist, when it was kill or be killed. But while other men changed later, you didn't. You're still back there in those dreadful times. You always will be. I'm truly sorry to say this, but there's no place for a man like you any more!"

He accepted it in silence, head bowed. What really shook him, however, was the realization of what he'd lost in losing Leigh.

She stood with both hands clenched on the table edge. She looked tall and very straight, her loveliness made still greater because it lay forever beyond him now. He felt a bottomless regret.

"Well, Leigh," he said, turning, "you told me. I wish you happiness."

He shouldered through the doorway, went downstairs, and found himself outside, standing on the plank walk, in the grip of a terrible loneliness.

GRIT blew along the street, stinging his face. The wind off the hills was wild. You can't go back, he thought; the only thing constant is change. It had required a big part of his life to learn that, to see himself as he actually was.

His gaze lifted. Across the street Bert McGrath's office sign swayed in the wind. He rolled a brown-paper cigarette, his mind tightening as he eyed the sign. He hardly noticed when a passing rider spoke. Suddenly he crushed the cigarette between his fingers and strode toward McGrath's law office.

Terrell missed something as he entered the office—McGrath's usual hearty greeting. McGrath, a heavy-set man with a mane of white hair, frowned from behind his desk. He raised his eyes and got to the point immediately.

"Still aim to buy the Shepherd lease?"

"Certainly. Why do you ask?"

"Figured you might change your mind, maybe ease up on him. Shepherd's had a hard year."

Terrell's jaw firmed. "You're the Association attorney, Bert. You know why I'm after that lease."

"Yes," McGrath answered wearily, "I reckon I do. But—"

"What are you trying to tell me, Bert?" Terrell demanded, leaning forward. "That I should abide a thief?"

Scowling, McGrath heaved to his feet and paced to the window overlooking Main Street. He studied it a space, then spoke, almost to

himself. "It wouldn't be so bad if he could get another lease. But he can't. All the small tracts are spoken for, and he can't handle the fee on a larger one."

"I've known men to lose every head of cattle in a blizzard and still survive."

McGrath said, "You could, in the old days. It's different now." His voice changed, grew harsher. "Terrell, this is the first time I ever knew you to misjudge a man."

"My mind is made up, Bert."

McGrath's shrug was a mixture of resignation and disappointment. "Ah, so it is." He settled his eyes upon Terrell, who wondered why he should feel unease under the steady gaze.

"See you after the sale," Terrell said abruptly, and stepped to the door.

To his surprise, the older man followed him several steps. "Buell tells me he expects just two bids, yours and Shepherd's. To me that means the other ranchers are laying off—to give Shepherd a lift, maybe. Or else they don't want to buck Terrell Kinder. Reckon you've become quite a big man, Terrell."

Terrell jerked to a stop, on the verge of a hot reply. But Bert McGrath was already pacing back to his desk, and Terrell locked the words inside him, feeling a surge of shame. Had he come to this, brawling with long-standing friends just because they held differing opinions?

Outside, he looked up and down the dusty street for old Fargo and, not sighting him, he started a slow stroll. A wave of loneliness came and he could not shake it. The two bids told the story, he realized. Men feared him, and the knowledge hurt. For he liked the company of most men, in his silent way. Nonetheless, a man was judged by his actions. Suddenly he knew a harsh truth: those violent times had marked him, as Leigh had said. They'd forced him into a taciturn shell. He wasn't liked.

Walking slowly, he thought of old Fargo and his dogged, loyal service, and felt a deep gratefulness. Looking back, Terrell knew Fargo had excused a great deal and had overlooked his temper and pride and bluntness. As for Leigh Richmond, he'd blindly allowed her to slip away to another man—a mistake he'd remember for the rest of his days. And there was Bert McGrath. Their friendship would never be the same.

"Howdy, Mr. Kinder."

Terrell glanced up at a man in worn range clothes, one Frank Pruitt, a tolerable good horse breaker who'd drifted too much, seldom staying put in one place.

"I just wondered," ventured Pruitt, "if you still have a full crew out your way?"

Terrell's first response was to remind Pruitt that a rider looking for work always came to the office in the rambling log house. He said, "It's been quiet lately," and then he heard himself saying, "No, there is a job. You might ride out tomorrow. Rolly Harvick's getting himself married."

As he spoke, a strange embarrassment engulfed him. He passed on quickly, before Pruitt could see it. Yet, in that brief interval, Terrell read another damning reflection of himself. Pruitt's sunburned face mirrored a great surprise, and Terrell understood. Pruitt had expected rebuff, and only his obvious need had driven him to approach Terrell Kinder on the street.

Terrell spun around. His voice carried the old bite. "Remember, if you work for me there'll be no damned drifting once your belly's full!"

PRUITT nodded fast, murmuring his thanks, and Terrell walked on. Already he regretted his impulsive action, because Pruitt wouldn't stay long. It came to him that yesterday he'd have turned Pruitt down. He guessed he'd been touched by Pruitt's watery eyes, which showed a certain hunger.

Thinking of old Fargo again, he moved to the street's end. Beyond War Bonnet's short limits stood the agency building, its timeless sandstone a dull brown in the unrelenting sun. It was also a reminder of the day's business. His gait became slower as he crossed to the other side and returned toward the hotel.

Some distance along the hard-packed stretch near the hotel, in front of Leech's Hardware, a team waited, heads down. High on the wagon seat a woman held her child.

Terrell paid scant attention. Not long afterward he saw a man leave the store and go to the wagon, sunlight glinting on the blade of a long-handled ax he carried. The man stood talking to the woman, his back turned.

Then, as he approached closer, something sawed at Terrell's nerves. His eyes raked the spare shape standing beside the wagon. He felt a stab of anger as he recognized Gibb Shepherd. Involuntarily, he hauled up and hesitated. But it was too late to turn back, because the woman spoke a low warning.

Shepherd wheeled swiftly. Terrell met the stare. Their glances locked, but neither man spoke. Shepherd's mouth thinned. Walking casually, Terrell drew even with the wagon.

All at once Shepherd's voice erupted, flat and hating. "Wait a minute, Kinder!"

Terrell turned reluctantly.

"Gibb!" the woman said, sharply. "Shut up!"

Sun had wrinkled and weathered her still-young face, making her seem far older than her years. She sat holding a child. In sickening perception, Terrell saw fear whiten her cheeks. Her arms circled the child protectingly.

"I've stayed quiet long enough," her husband answered, not turning his head toward her.

"Gibb, you listen to me!"

Instead, Gibb Shepherd ignored her and clenched the ax handle in both bony hands. He stood stiff as a post, his face looking pinched, embittered, the skin taut as stretched rawhide over the prominent cheekbones.

His thinness shocked Terrell. Only the eyes were alive; in them shone a wild light. "I want no trouble with you," said Terrell. "Go on about your business."

"You rob a man and say that!" Shepherd started a slow advance.

The woman stiffened. "Gibb! Come back!"

Her husband kept coming slowly.

"Anybody can bid for that lease," snapped Terrell. "You know that."

"Nobody but you'd steal a man's living!"

At once, Terrell saw his mistake. There was no reasoning with Shepherd. "Go back to your wagon," he ordered curtly, and turned to leave.

"Don't tell me what to do!" Shepherd came on, deliberate, unswerving, his knuckles like white knobs on the ax.

Terrell froze. His right hand dropped instinctively to his holster.

"Gibb!" the woman cried. "He'll kill you!"

Again, Shepherd seemed not to hear, and the fear in the woman's warning shook Terrell. For once in his life he acted uncertainly in the face of violence.

He stepped backward a pace and said, "Damn you, man, show some sense!"

Shepherd's pale eyes blazed. He advanced to the walk's edge and halted. "You've gone too far," he muttered, in a dead voice.

Terrell felt his tolerance crack. "Stop right there!" he ordered. "I'll have no Jayhawk cow thief—"

There wasn't time to finish. With a shout, Gibb Shepherd leaped to the walk and swung the ax. The woman screamed. Terrell dodged just as the blade cut a shining arc past his face.

For a tick of time Shepherd was thrown off balance by his own savagery, his guard down. But Terrell stood locked in a curious paralysis, rooted, incapable of movement.

Even as he stayed frozen, Shepherd two-handed the ax up once more, swiftly, a killing gleam in his eyes. Then, on instinct, Terrell back-stepped and bumped into the store's door frame. He saw the blur of the striking blade, and jumped sideways as Shepherd rushed in. The heavy steel thudded into the door siding, whacking deep, buried there. Shepherd tore at the handle.

AT LAST Terrell moved forward. Before Shepherd could rip the blade free, he took one leaping stride, his knotted hands rising. He crashed his big fist to the long jaw. He saw Shepherd fall heavily upon the walk.

For a full moment Shepherd lay stunned. Then, slowly, his arms and legs stirred. He got an elbow under him, but he could not rise. Standing over him, legs braced, Terrell just now realized that he'd made no effort to use his pistol, and wondered why. He saw puzzlement break across the pale eyes and heard his own voice speaking in an odd tone.

"Your family's waiting."

Shepherd just stared.

Without thought, Terrell turned and strode rapidly across the street, past the wagon where the woman sat hushed, all eyes, her child held to her. He walked straight to the nearest store front, a saddle shop. Inside, he pulled up short and gazed around without seeing, breathing hard. He discovered that he was trembling, and yet he felt relieved of a tremendous load.

The white head of the old saddlemaker bobbed into his vision, out of the shop's gloom. A voice he knew said, "Shepherd was asking for it if a man ever was. But you didn't shoot."

Terrell, not answering, turned to face the street. He saw Gibb Shepherd lay the ax in the wagon bed and climb stiffly to the seat, ignoring the stares of the small crowd outside the hardware store and the Cattle King. Speaking to the team, Shepherd reined off toward the agency. He drove slackly, without interest, his thin shoulders humped.

Within a matter of moments the crowd broke up. Terrell saw the images as blurs, no single face standing out at first. Now some of these people began drifting in the agency's direction. Among them he recognized Colonel DeWitt Richmond, straight and angular.

An inertia gripped Terrell, and he did not understand himself. He had no idea how long he stood in the saddle shop before he saw Bert McGrath come heavily up the street, a small packet of papers in his hand.

His eyes followed McGrath as he paced out of sight. Afterward, he asked sharply, "What time is it, Jim?"

"Quarter to three. Lease sale's three o'clock, isn't it?"

Terrell nodded, already going to the door. His boots tapped the walk and he turned—away from the agency, heading for Joel Creed's livery. He wouldn't wait for McGrath or old Fargo.

Though striding slowly, he had the feeling of running. The realization angered him unreasonably, pricked at his pride. Hadn't he told Buell and McGrath he wouldn't attend the bidding? True. Certainly there was no question of fear involved.

It wasn't clear to him just when, or how, he began to notice the change in War Bonnet—its somber stillness. It seemed that the town, drowzing in the sweltering afternoon heat, waited for something. Unexpectedly, old danger signals beat inside him.

He paused in stride and glanced over his shoulder. The street was almost empty, save for a man entering the hotel. He felt a little foolish. What's got into me? he thought, and brushed the unease away and went on. He'd simply lived too many years under the old set of rules, when primitive instincts of warning often meant survival.

He passed the wagon yard and saw the high frame of the stables. Nobody lounged out front, which wasn't unusual for this hour of the day. Neither did he see Creed in the runway.

Creed's cramped office faced open in greeting. Terrell walked toward it and found it empty. There was no use waiting for Creed, who kept his own hours, so Terrell placed money on the desk and returned to the runway. His gelding was in the usual stall, near the barn's center.

He turned to get his horse. After no more than a few paces, he perceived a change in here. The rear doors were closed, leaving the barn dark. Slipshod as Creed was, he seldom—

SOMETHING crackled within Terrell, the old warnings drumming, and this time he did not disregard them. He lunged low for a darkened stall, drawing his pistol in the same burst of motion. But before he'd gone two racing steps, he saw the flash of flame and felt one leg buckle like rotten wood. He fell and rolled, hearing the deafening roar of the gun and the banging of the terrified horses on the stall boards.

He still had his pistol, and he fired at the tall shadow making the spitting flashes—fired till the hammer clicked empty, the pinpoint of flame vanished, and he thought he heard a body fall.

And then, as if delayed, a bullet whanged close. Quickly, another gun joined in, the two shots jamming together. Afterward the barn fell as still as before, except for the horses.

A blackness dropped over Terrell Kinder, a growing blanket that came fast. He tried to drag himself up on the sound knee. For the first time his strong body did not respond to his driving will. He collapsed suddenly, felt straw litter under his face.

He heard boots. Hands lifted and turned him gently, and old Fargo's face took focus in the gloom. "Terrell!" he burst out. "Look at me, boy!" There came distant steps and vague faces, and old Fargo's voice seemed to fade and then to climb. "You fools! Don't stand there! Get the doctor!"

Terrell remembered being carried into the office, and even here, upon the bunk, the darkness followed. Nausea rolled within him. He could feel the blood running down his thigh.

He didn't know when she came in, but suddenly Leigh Richmond was near. She hovered over him and seized his hand and kept saying his name, over and over.

He said, "It's too late to stop McGrath. Get word to Shepherd, tell him he can sub-lease from me."

She made a tiny crying sound. "Father went to offer him a job. Oh, Terrell, it's all right!"

"Leigh, what answer did you give to that other man's proposal?"

Men, tramping noisily into the office, cut across his words. Somebody said, "Ennis Buell is back there with Nels Ivy, both dead. Remember Ivy?"

Leigh Richmond's face was so near that he caught the scent of her hair. "There's your answer, Terrell. Buell tried to kill you when I told him I wouldn't marry him."

"Buell!" The scene this morning came back to Terrell—Ennis Buell coming by the ranch, making certain Terrell came to town. But Nels Ivy!

Old Fargo said heavily, "You got Ivy. Buell was my meat. Ivy'd just finished serving his time and come back. Buell must've hired him." Fargo loomed over Terrell, gaunt and apologetic. "I spotted Ivy, followed him here. He came early, then Buell slipped in, and it put me between them. I couldn't see Ivy good, and he shot before I could—" His voice shaded off, miserable and self-damning.

"Much obliged anyway, Fargo. You've always been my right-hand man."

Old Fargo scrubbed a thorny hand across his eyes and faced away abruptly. It was, Terrell knew suddenly, a long overdue acknowledgment to a loyal man.

"I've been pretty rough," he said aloud to both Leigh and Fargo. "Hard to change a man, I guess."

"I was wrong, too," he heard her answer. "Terrell, I was watching from my room. I saw you and Shepherd. You had every excuse to kill him. Why, I'm just beginning to understand you!"

"Know what I was thinking, Leigh, as I went down? That big house—all empty. Nobody in it."

"But there will be. You know that now," Leigh said softly.

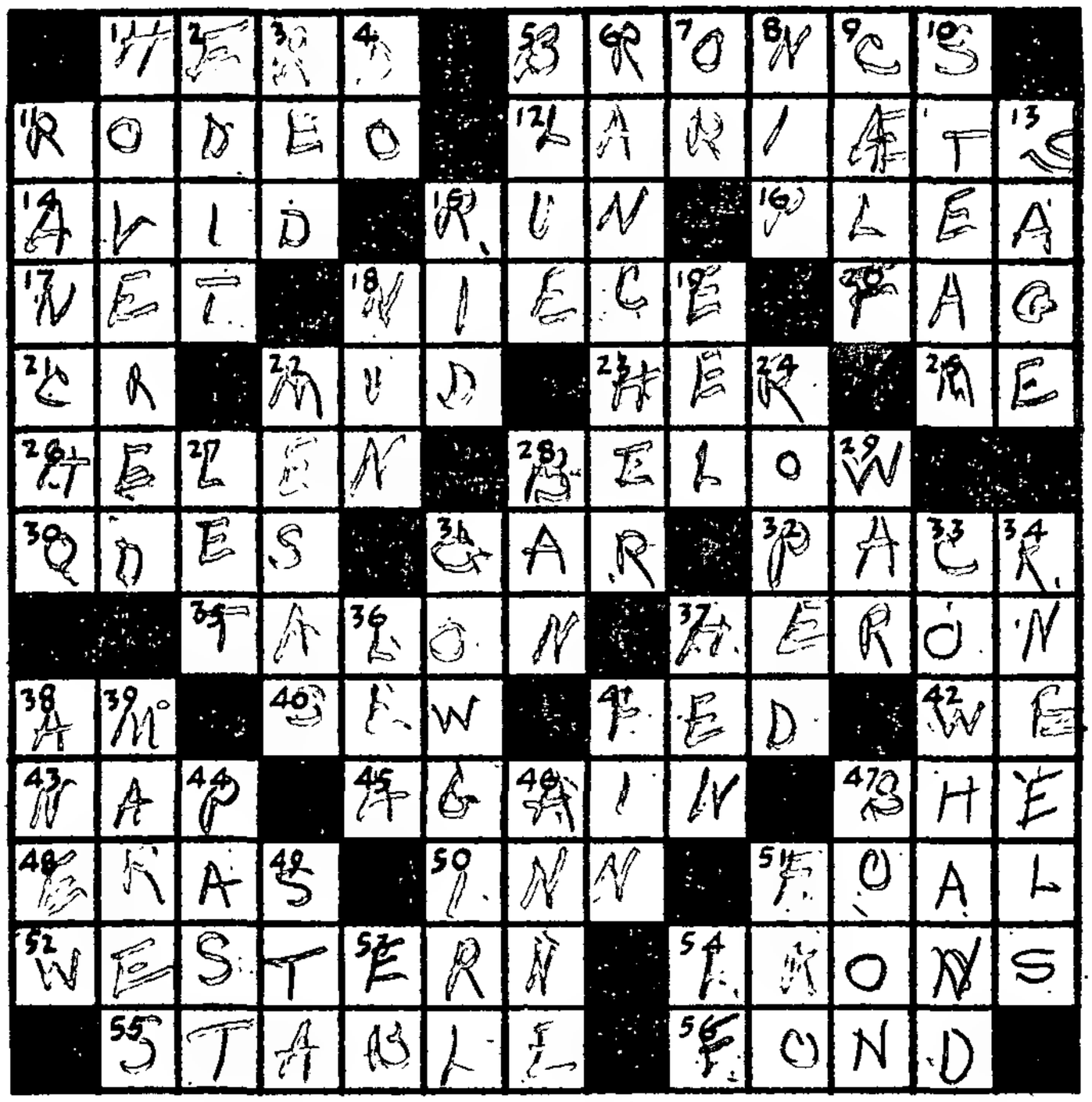
She held on to him fiercely while he fought back the crowding blackness. He stirred, trying to speak again, but Leigh touched her fingers to his lips. "Be quiet, Terrell. Everything's going to be all right now."

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 70)

1. A-3, B-1, C-4, D-2.
2. Leonard Slye
3. 37 years
4. La Mesa, Calif., near San Diego
5. Bronco Billy Anderson
6. Tucumcari is a New Mexico cowtown. Tumacacori is an old Spanish mission near Tucson, Ariz.
7. Because its diameter is 45/100ths of an inch.
8. Watermelon.
9. Reno, Nevada, but it's only nine miles farther west than Santa Barbara.
10. No, but their tails are very short.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Group of cattle
5 Rodeo animals
11 Wild West show
12 Cowboy ropes
14 Greedy
15 To gallop
16 Entreaty
17 Fishing snare
18 Sister's daughter
20 To tire by labor
21 Credit (abbr.)
22 Wet earth
23 Feminine pronoun
25 Myself
26 Girl's name
28 Beneath
30 Poems
31 Jalopy
32 To fill, as a trunk
35 Eagle's claw
37 Wading bird
38 Part of "to be"
40 To stitch
41 Gave food to
42 You and I
43 Short sleep
45 Once more
47 The lady
48 Periods in history
50 Small hotel
51 Young horse
52 Cowboy movie
54 Presses clothes
55 Building for horses
56 Affectionate

DOWN

1 Hung about
2 What editors do
3 Scarlet
4 To accomplish
5 Sky color
6 Western cattleman
7 Either
8 To pinch
9 Young cow
10 Vapor
11 Southwestern cattle farm
13 Western shrubby plant
15 Free of
18 Convent dweller
19 Snakelike fish
22 Western flat-topped hills
24 Lassoed
27 To allow
28 To prohibit
29 Armed conflict
31 Female rodeo performer
33 Cowboy
34 Rests on the knees
36 Meadow
37 Chicken
38 Afresh
39 Female horses
41 Fish flipper
44 Time gone by
46 Girl's name
47 At once
49 Station (abbr.)
51 To and ——
53 Eastbound (abbr.)
54 In case that

M	A	M	A	■	L	A	D	■	R	A	P	T
A	W	A	Y	■	O	D	E	■	O	L	E	O
R	A	V	E	■	P	A	L	O	M	I	N	O
E	R	E	■	H	E	M	■	P	A	■	■	■
S	E	R	I	E	S	■	R	A	N	G	E	R
■	■	I	N	N	■	O	I	L	■	R	A	Y
T	A	C	K	■	C	U	P	■	S	U	R	E
A	R	K	■	B	A	T	■	R	I	B	■	■
N	E	S	T	E	R	■	G	O	P	H	E	R
■	■	■	O	R	■	M	O	B	■	O	N	E
W	R	A	N	G	L	E	R	■	D	U	D	E
H	I	D	E	■	E	S	E	■	U	S	E	D
O	D	D	S	■	D	A	D	■	B	E	D	S

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

The True Story of Soapy Smith

King of the Bunco Men

by Burton L. Wollenzien

BUY a bar of soap for only five dollars. You may win a hundred dollar bill, a fifty, or at least a twenty."

This was the sort of bait being offered to the people on the streets of Denver during the late 1880's. It also marked the real beginning of Soapy Smith's ten-year career as "King of the Bunco Men."

John Randolph Smith was born in Georgia during the year of 1860. Conditions existing during the Reconstruction Period, following the Civil War, were unsatisfying to young Smith. Leaving his home in Georgia, he traveled West, believing that there he could acquire fame and fortune without too much effort.

Soon after his arrival in Texas, young Smith was helping to drive herds of Texas longhorn cattle along the Chisholm Trail to Abilene. During the course of his range riding and trail driving, he became acquainted with many well-known men of that era, men both inside and outside the law.

A circus in San Antonio, Texas, was actu-

ally responsible for starting John Randolph Smith on his career as a bunco man. Instead of just enjoying the circus and keeping his money in his pocket, he foolishly attempted to buck a game which he had never seen before, because it seemed so easy to beat.

Instead, the walnut shells and the rubber pea in the hands of an experienced operator were too much for young Smith. By the time he realized he couldn't beat the old "shell game," his money was gone.

Then and there, Smith came to the conclusion that it was foolish to work hard for a living, when it was so easy to separate other men from their money. This decision was to start him on his rather infamous career, lasting ten years and coming to a violent end in Skageway, Alaska.

The decision made, Smith borrowed some money and followed the circus, as one of the clan of grifters and hangers-on which followed tent shows in those days. In due time he arrived in Leadville, Colorado. It was in Colorado where he spent most of his years as a bunco artist.

In Leadville, Smith watched a pitch man working a game which was new to most people. This particular bunco man had worked out this game himself. Young Smith's affable and winning personality made it easy for him to team up with this Leadville "salesman," from whom he soon learned all there was to know concerning the operation of this particular bunco game.

In a short time, the pupil became more adept at the game than the teacher. When his partner left Leadville, Smith decided to move to the rapidly growing city of Denver to set up his bunco racket. Being gifted with a glib tongue and adeptness at slight-of-hand, his business soon prospered.

So skilled was he at this game of his that he was never surpassed, or even equalled, by any of his many imitators. It was in Denver that he acquired his nickname, "Soapy.' The name clung to him for the rest of his life.

Soapy became a sort of tarnished Robin Hood, who swindled people whenever possible, yet never refused help to anyone in need. An assorted gang of thugs, con men, and shills, worked with him, and were always at his beck and call. In later years he even managed to take over virtual control of several towns, running them as it suited his fancy. That, however, is another story.

Soapy Smith was 28 years of age when he began setting up his tripod and "sample case" on the streets of Denver. He grew a heavy black beard, because it made him look older and seemed to inspire confidence in those he swindled. Cubes of soap were used as the basis of his lucrative bunco game. Placing some of the soap cubes and some squares of blue paper on top of his sample case, he would proceed to arouse the curiosity of the rapidly gathering crowd.

"Step right up, gents," he would say, while holding up a soap cube for all to see. "This is a bar of soap, although, judging from the looks of many of you, I would say you seldom use it." The crowd never took offense at this remark, as Soapy's disarming smile tended to erase any implied sarcasm.

"Now," he would continue, "who will pay twenty-five cents for a bar of this soap?" Naturally there would be no takers, and Soapy would go into the second part of his act.

HAULING out his wallet, he would remove a wad of bills, allowing the interested audience to see a hundred dollar bill, several fifties and twenties, plus numerous ones and twos. Then, accompanied by a running fire of small talk, Soapy would start wrapping the soap cubes in the squares of blue paper, twisting the paper tightly over each cube.

At intervals, with apparent nonchalance, he would wrap a cube of soap in one of the greenbacks. Then, wrapping the blue paper around it and twisting it shut, he would toss the package onto the growing pile.

"Now, gentlemen," he would say, looking very innocent, "you saw me wrap bills around some of the bars of soap. If you've been watching carefully, you should know which packages have the money in them." At this point he would have the undivided attention of his eager, curious audience.

"For just five dollars you can select any package in the pile. You may win a hundred, a fifty, or at least a twenty dollar bill, and for only five dollars. Who is going to be first, gentlemen?"

No one wanted to take the first chance, but after a bit more of Soapy's glib talk, one man would step up and pay his five dollars. After carefully selecting a package, he would open it and display one of the bills, usually no larger than a twenty. While this was purely a "come-on" performed by one of Soapy's shills, it did serve to start things moving. The bars of soap would begin to sell fast and furiously.

Most takers naturally found nothing but soap in the five-dollar package they purchased. Not wanting to admit they had been suckered, they naturally would not admit they had found nothing but a cube of soap. At best, a purchaser might find a one or two-dollar bill wrapped around his soap cube.

Even when the wrapped cubes were nearly sold out, not more than half a dozen large denomination bills had been retrieved. These bills were all in the hands of Soapy's shills, who had been liberally sprinkled throughout the crowd.

Soapy's place of business was anywhere he decided to set up his tripod and "sample case." He made good money, at this con game and others, because he worked on a trait of human nature exploited by all confidence men, both past and present. He knew that most people are suckers for anything which looks like easy money.

Despite his trading on that human weakness, Soapy did set up and follow one rule for which he deserved a measure of credit. While his "soap swindle" was intended for any out-of-towner he could hook, he would never knowingly work it on local residents if he could help it.

If it became impossible to discourage a local resident from trying the game, as was often the case, Soapy would, if at all possible, return the money the "sucker" had spent, as soon as it could be done.

A friend of Soapy Smith's once asked, "Soapy, tell me, just how much of that paper money do you actually wrap up with those soap cubes?"

Black-bearded Soapy grinned, as if he were enjoying a huge joke. Placing one of his "educated" hands on his friend's shoulder, he looked directly at him and replied, "Most of the time—none!"

RANCH FLICKER TALK

Movie News Roundup by BOB CUMMINGS—Next Issue!

●

Featuring a Review of Warner Bros.'

THE LONE RANGER

***with* CLAYTON MOORE *and* BONITA GRANVILLE**

PLUS

A WORD-AND-PICTURE PERSONALITY SKETCH OF

JAY SILVERHEELS

"I wouldn't want to have to fight my brother-in-law," Red said

RED

BY NICK SUMNER

IT HAD been hot and dry for days, the kind of heat that made fiddlestrings of men's nerves. The whole outfit was raspy, sour-tempered; there'd been a couple of rows in the bunkhouse that had almost ended in blows, though it was a crowd that ordinarily got on well together.

Clem Cady, short, plump, sleepy-eyed, with features that fell naturally into lines of good humor, didn't look like the sort of man to be affected by nerves. But sitting on the top rail of the corral fence beside Big Red Dolan, he felt the tension of Red's long, rangy body communicated to him.

For going on three years Clem and Red had been saddle partners, and Clem hadn't yet managed to figure why Red should have singled him out. He could only be humbly thank-

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WHEREVER DOLAN WENT, exciting things happened . . . and so fast that good-natured Clem Cady had trouble keeping up. . . .

ful that it was so. Red was everything on earth that Clem wasn't—big, handsome, reckless, spectacular, the kind of man who had only to come into any room to make men—and women—take notice of him. So when Red was uneasy, Clem was uneasy.

Right now he was wishing Old Man Whitaker hadn't picked this particular day to break horses. The Old Man was a pretty good boss, all in all, making allowances for his fussiness and the rough edges of his tongue, but his anxiety about the dry spell wasn't improving his disposition any. Right now it was his son, Walt, who was getting the direct effect of his ill humor.

If it stopped there it would be bad enough, but Clem felt in his bones that this day wasn't going to end without trouble. And for trouble to break in Red's neighborhood without his being mixed up in it was just against the nature of things.

Walt Whitaker wasn't showing up to any particular advantage just now. He seldom did, when his father was around. He was twenty-one, a big-boned, heavy-set young man who hadn't yet grown up to his size. In spite of the adolescent awkwardness that still showed in the way he handled his body, he was a pretty good hand with cattle and horses, and would be a better one when a few years' more experience had whittled him into shape. But the Old Man just couldn't leave his failings alone. His comments now, as Walt fought the big roan he was backing, were enough to make Clem, who had never liked Walt any too much, feel sorry for him.

"Oh, why don't you lay off a minute, Dad? Walt's doing his best." That was Peg Whitaker speaking.

The brief look Walt spared his sister didn't hold a whole lot of gratitude for her interference. The Old Man glared.

"If you have to hang around here where you have no business, instead of staying in the house where a woman belongs, at least don't be talking out of turn about things you know nothing about."

Peg Whitaker's black head jerked up, and some of the family temper snapped in her eyes. She was one person on Block 7 who wasn't one bit in awe of the Old Man. She did what she pleased, despite his continual nagging. She rode out with the crew, dressed like a man in levis and shirt, and looking mighty handsome and womanly in spite of them.

Lately, it was usually Red she chose to ride beside. That was another reason for the little fingers of worry that kept tugging at Clem. If there were any one thing Whitaker was less likely to stand for than another, it was the notion of one of his hands shining up to his girl.

"His best, huh?" Under Peg's defiant look, the Old Man was working himself up to a real tantrum. "Well, if that's his best, he better quit trying to ride a man's animal. Maybe he'd feel more at home on the ground, driving a mule."

That was about as deadly an insult as you could offer a cowman. The Old Man didn't mean it, of course, but from the look on Walt's blockily handsome face, Clem judged it was lucky he wasn't on the ground. Situated as he was, he relieved his feelings by giving the bucking roan a vicious cut with the quirt, followed up by a rake of the spurs along the animal's sides. The roan reacted by going straight up on his hind legs in an appallingly sudden move that pitched Walt right out of the saddle, to land in the dust with a painful and humiliating bump.

The stream of curses he let go with as he picked himself up indicated that he wasn't hurt, only mad. He started after the roan, which had raced over to the other side of the corral and stood there, head flung up, neighing defiance of the whole two-legged world.

The Old Man's voice struck roughly at Walt. "Never mind. If you can't do the job any better'n that, better leave it to somebody that can! Red, you show him how a grown-up man handles a horse."

Walt took his place along the rail, as far from his father as he could get, and sat scowling down at his clenched fists. There was a look in his eyes that kept the others from joshing him about his fall, as they would normally have done.

ANYWAY, nobody had much attention to spare for him. All eyes were focussed on Red. Clem was proudly conscious, almost as if it had been for him, of the tribute

of their silent concentration. These men were all experts at their trade—Whitaker didn't hire any other kind—but, even among them, Red's performance was something to see.

His poise in the saddle would have looked almost casual, but for the grip of his legs against the animal's muscle-cased sides. The big crafty brute was trying to dislodge his rider with every trick inherited from generations of outlaw ancestors, but the plunges, the murderous jarring, the jerks and twistings and sudden changes of direction, weren't accomplishing anything except to tire the horse out.

Getting desperate now, the stallion gathered himself together for one big do-or-die effort, muscles bunching and swelling in great corded ridges under the sweating hide. Then, giving out his ear-splitting war cry, he flung himself back and reached for the sky.

Outlined against the hot, brassy horizon, the horse looked bigger than life, a menacing creature out of some primitive nightmare. Red was balanced on his back at a fantastic ninety-degree angle. It didn't seem possible that any man could hang on like that.

Just as Clem was feeling that his held breath was going to burst his lungs, Red leaned forward along the animal's neck and reached for leather. His slow, steady pull on the reins forced the great head down relentlessly, inch by inch. All the while, he kept talking, talking, in a soft, soothing flow of sound, as he might have talked to a frightened child.

The stallion came down to earth all at once, forefeet striking with a thud that sent a sympathetic jar along Clem's backbone, and stood quivering, head bowed in defeat. It almost made a man sad to see so much pride and power beaten.

Red slid lightly to the ground and stood there stroking the great neck, murmuring, "Easy, boy, easy. You're all right now. Sure, you're all right."

"Man!" Peg's husky voice gave expression to what all of them were feeling. "That was riding!"

Walt snapped, "Why not? That jughead's more'n half horse himself."

Earlier in the day, those might have been fighting words, but the tussle with the roan seemed to have let off Red's piled-up steam. He laughed and then drawled, "I'd rather claim this horse for a brother than a lot of two-legged critters I've met."

"All right, boys," the Old Man cut in, "we've done enough for one day. I reckon you want to be getting ready for the dance. And don't any of you be coming in an hour before breakfast with a skinful of redeye. We got work to do tomorrow."

The reminder of the dance they'd been looking forward to for a week put everybody back into a good humor, except for Walt, who strode off by himself, glowering. The others drifted away in couples and threes, laughing and joshing. Clem was whistling *Strawberry Roan* between his teeth, off-key, as he fell in beside his partner.

"Clem," Red said, laughing, "why don't you either get yourself a new tune or learn to whistle that one right?" Clem smiled and went on whistling. His inability to carry a tune was an old joke between them. "Anyway, that sour noise means you feel good, doesn't it?"

Clem nodded. This was the way he liked things, everybody happy and friendly. And it would be so easy to keep them that way if only folks would take things the way they came, like he did. Maybe he wasn't so dumb, he decided. Maybe all the smart folks, always hankering after something they didn't have, really weren't as sensible as he was.

Before he could carry the thought any further, Peg was standing in their path. "Going to be at the dance, Red?"

"Couldn't keep me away. You going to save me a lot of dances?"

"Maybe. If you get there before they're all taken."

"Now, Peg, you know I'm the best dancer around here. You don't want the rest of these clodhoppers trampling all over your party slippers."

"Peg!" The Old Man's voice was a restrained bellow. "You come along with us and fix supper."

"Everything's all ready. All I've got to do is warm it up."

"You come along anyway."

Peg strolled off, calling back over her shoulder, "See you tonight, Red."

"You know," Red observed meditatively,

"I like that girl. Pretty and smart and sassy —yes, sir, she's my kind of woman. I like her a lot."

Clem nodded, because that seemed to be indicated. But all of a sudden he was wishing the dance were safely over and done with.

THE lights, the colors of the girls' best dresses and the men's clean shirts and bandannas, the sound of old Joe Searle's fiddle, all gave the schoolhouse a special feeling of happy excitement. And for Clem, at any rate, it all seemed to center around Red's high, bright head and Peg's red dress.

The dress fitted snugly around the girl's slim waist and flared out below the hips into a full skirt that swirled when she moved. Her black hair hung down almost to her shoulders in glossy curls. It wasn't too hard to understand why any man she smiled at, as she was smiling at Red now, could snap his fingers at trouble.

Clem wasn't much at dancing. He was satisfied to watch Peg and Red winding in and out among the other couples, their bodies completely attuned to the music and each other. No other pair in the room was so good-looking, so graceful, or so full of vibrant life. They belonged together. It wasn't right for Whitaker or anybody else to try to keep them apart.

No liquor was allowed at these dances, but there was always a jug to be passed around out in back of the schoolhouse. When Walt came in, it didn't need two looks to guess where he'd been or what he'd been doing. He wasn't unsteady on his feet yet, but his face was red, his eyes glittering and mean. He pushed right through the dancers, and most of them got out of his way. Only his sister and her man were too wrapped up to notice *him till he bumped squarely into them.*

The impact rocked Walt back on his heels. A nervous giggle came from a girl nearby. He recovered his balance and glared around him, then his eyes came back to focus on Peg like he'd never seen her before.

"Whyn't you look where you're goin'?"

The words were just a little thick, his tongue slipping control as his whole body seemed due to slip at any minute. Clem started edging his way toward the three of them. It was easier to do than it would have been a minute earlier. Other couples were drawing back, leaving a clear space around Walt.

"Why don't you?" Peg snapped back. "If you can't hold your liquor, you'd better stay outside till you sober up."

"Who says I can't hold my liquor?" The hot, sullen eyes switched to Red. "You, huh?"

"Red didn't say anything. It was me."

"You shut up." Walt's hand outlined a gesture as if he were brushing her away like a bothersome fly. His eyes remained fixed hard on Red. "You think you can hold your liquor better'n me, don't you?"

"Could be," Red drawled.

Clem, standing at his elbow now, sent out a silent prayer, "Red, don't make him mad now when he's drunk. Don't have a fight with him here in front of everybody, with Peg mixed in." The Old Man would never forgive that. He'd boot Red off Block 7 and never let him get near Peg again.

"Think you can do anything better'n me—ride, drink, fight, anything. Old Man thinks so, too." The high, slurred voice plowed on, spilling out everything that had been boiling around inside for heaven knew how long. "The Old Man always did think I was no good. *Thinks you're somethin'. Prob'ly you figure* you'll marry Peg an' be boss one these days —boss over me."

"Walt, will you shut up!" Peg blazed. "Red's never asked me to marry him!"

"Careless of me, Peg," Red said softly. "I'm asking you now."

The color of her dress was reflected in Peg's brown cheeks. "Red, you don't have to, just because this jugheaded brother of mine—"

"Nobody said anything about having to. *Will you, Peg?*"

Everybody on the floor was staring, but it was clear they could all have been in Jericho for all the mind Peg was paying them. "You big redheaded idiot! I was beginning to wonder if I'd have to propose myself!"

Her arms were reaching for Red's neck when Walt caught her and shoved her back. She tripped on the hem of her skirt, and Clem had to make a grab for her to keep her from falling. Red was facing Walt, and his voice

had a held-in quiet that Clem recognized as a danger signal.

"Walt, I wouldn't want to have to fight my brother-in-law."

"You ain't goin' to be a brother'n-law o' mine. You might think that's what you're gonna do, but the Old Man ain't 'bout t' let Peg get hitched up with a saddle tramp!"

CLEM knew he had to stop this some way. He stepped in between the two big men and caught at Walt's arm with both hands, trying with all the weight of his stocky body to force him back. He spoke loudly, using a voice he didn't recognize as his.

"Walt, you shut up. You're stinking drunk and you don't know what you're talking about."

The heavy arm wrenched itself out of Clem's grasp. A fist crashed into his face, and fireworks exploded back of his eyeballs. His head connected smartly with the floorboards, and what he knew about the events of the next few minutes was mostly gathered from eyewitness accounts later.

Those disagreed as to details, but were unanimous on the point of its having been a fight such as the county had never seen before. The schoolhouse was a shambles before the combatants were pulled apart and dragged off to the lock-up.

Marshal Jim Hudder eyed Clem sympathetically when Clem went there to visit Red, but remained adamant. "Settling an argument with your fists is one thing, but breaking up a dance with ladies present, and wrecking county property— Judge Toms is holding a hearing at two o'clock. I've sent word to Old Man Whitaker to be here. You can see Red now if you want to. He doesn't look so good, but Walt looks worse."

Clem could hardly bring himself to meet Red's eyes through the bars. Red behind bars —it was just all wrong. Clem's hands twisted miserably at his hat brim. "Red, why don't you tell me what a half-baked, brainless, flap-eared jackass I am? If I just hadn't mixed in—"

"You'd have saved yourself a crack on the coconut. Did you think I couldn't take care of Walt by myself, for gosh sake?"

"I guess I just wasn't thinking."

"Well, next time just don't *try* to think. Leave it to me, and we'll both make out better."

"I know."

"Well, don't take it so hard. Walt was spoiling for a fight. I'd have had to pin his ears back anyway."

But Clem wasn't fooled. Red was just being kind. There was no talking away the fact that he, Clem, had made a mess of things. The minute he got away from his regular chores, he was way out of his depth and no fitting partner for a man like Red. He felt as sunk as if he were looking up from the bottom of a deep black hole that didn't have any bottom.

"Well," Red was saying, "I don't reckon the judge'll do any more than fine us, and I have nearly a month's wages coming—probably the last wages we'll be getting from Block 7."

Clem nodded dumbly, thinking of what that would mean for Red and Peg. "You liked that job, didn't you, Clem?"

"It was all right."

"I've hauled you off a lot of jobs since we teamed up, haven't I?" Red asked.

Clem nodded again. If Red's temper didn't get him in trouble, he got fiddlefooted and wanted to move along.

"Well, we always got another job all right, didn't we?"

"Sure." There was always somebody wanting to hire Big Red Dolan—and his partner, if Red was set on having it that way.

"Well, don't start worrying, then. We'll make out."

"Sure."

THE hearing was a brief one, since nobody was disputing the essential facts. Old Judge Toms, after a few pithy remarks about grown men who didn't know what was or wasn't a fitting place to brawl in, fined Red and Walt twenty dollars apiece. Old Man Whitaker strode to the bench and slapped down a couple of double eagles.

"From what's been said," he growled, "I reckon it was Walt who started the fight, so I'll settle up for both of 'em."

"Thanks, Mr. Whitaker," Red cut in, "but

there's no call for you to do that. You can take it out of my wages."

"I said I'd settle," Whitaker repeated grimly. "I don't want the Whitakers to be owing you anything, Dolan." He pulled two more gold coins from his wallet and held them out to Red. "Here's your wages through the end of the month. You can ride out to the bunkhouse and pick up your stuff."

"All right, Mr. Whitaker, if that's the way you want it."

"That's the way I want it, and don't you forget it."

"Reckon I'll take my time, too, Mr. Whitaker," Clem said.

The Old Man's tight mouth softened a little. "You don't need to, Cady. You're a good hand. I'm not holding anything against you."

"Thanks, but I'll take my time."

Whitaker dug down into his wallet again. "You'll do yourself no good trailing along with this redheaded saddle tramp. But it's your business. Be a damn fool if you want to. Come on, Walt."

Riding out to Block 7 to collect their belongings, Red and Clem were both quiet. Between his aching head and his pestering conscience, Clem didn't have any desire to talk, but it was so unnatural for Red to be silent this long that he finally had to do something about it.

"Don't you worry, Red—" and that was a funny thing for *him* to be saying—"we'll get a job, probably a better job. And Peg will wait. When the Old Man's simmered down, maybe she can talk him into seeing sense about her and you." But Clem wasn't really able to put any conviction into the picture of Whitaker being talked into anything he'd set his bull-head against.

Red nodded absently. "Clem, I've been thinking. Remember what I said this morning about your leaving the thinking to me?"

"Yeah, sure. I reckon you were right, Red."

"Well, you keep that in mind, and don't get sore at what I'm going to say."

The idea of his getting sore at anything Red might say was so ludicrous that, bad as he felt, Clem couldn't hold back a chuckle. Red didn't echo it. His face was grim, and his eyes fixed on his horse's ears.

"What I was thinking is that there's no sense in your throwing up a good job just because I got fired. The Old Man wanted you to stay on. I want you to tell him you changed your mind about quitting, you hear?"

"Sure, Red, if you say so."

Clem didn't trust his voice to say any more. He felt suddenly empty inside, as if everything had dropped out from under him. Funny, with all the times he'd told himself he wasn't good enough for Red, and there wasn't any reason for their partnership, he'd somehow never imagined Red's wanting to bust it up. But if that was the way Red wanted it, there just wasn't any more to be said.

"That's good sense." Red's voice was loud and overhearty. "I'm just naturally a fiddlefoot, you're the stay-put kind, and neither of us is going to change. No sense in my being tied down, no sense in your being yanked up by the roots all the time. We had some good times together, but hell, nothing lasts forever. Right?"

"Right, Red."

The rest of the ride, Red kept talking almost as usual, and Clem tried to keep his end up. There was no sense in making Red feel bad.

In the empty bunkhouse they looked at each other for a minute; then Red picked up his warbag, slapped Clem's shoulder, said, "Luck, kid," and was off with his long, easy stride, not looking back.

LIFE on Block 7 wasn't much fun these days. The dry spell showed no signs of breaking. Every morning men looked up into a cloudless sky and swore and wondered if it were ever going to rain again. Grass was beginning to look brown, cattle were getting restless and spooky, and so were the men.

The Old Man's temper had an edge you could cut rawhide on, Walt went around looking like thunder and with a chip on his shoulder so you could hardly speak to him, and Peg rode by herself, avoiding her father. It was understood in the bunkhouse that she and Whitaker had had an unholy row over his firing of Red. One of the hands had been passing the house and heard them yelling at each other.

In the midst of it all, Clem went about his

job, ploddingly, doing what he was told, not saying much to anybody. It was just a job now. With no Red to joke or to share things with him, all the salt and zest had gone out of it. Clem had lost his appetite, and for the first time in his healthy life, he didn't sleep nights.

He'd lie awake in the bunkhouse, listening to the other men snoring around him, holding his body quiet with an effort that made him ache, till he couldn't stand it any longer. Then he'd slip cautiously out of bed and tiptoe to the door. Outside, he'd sit down, pull on his boots, and prowl around in quest of a little coolness. It crossed his mind that if anyone spotted him, he might easily be shot at as a rustler.

The fourth night of his wanderings, both the Whitakers were away. The Old Man had gone to town to see a cattle buyer, saying he'd be back by supper time, and an hour after he left Walt had taken off, saying nothing to anyone. Supper had come and gone with no sign of either of them.

It was darker than the inside of a boot, no moon, no stars, and a breathless stillness in the air. It felt like rain, Clem thought, but he was too low to get really excited over the prospect of a break in the weather.

He drifted in the direction of the main house. Sometimes it was a little cooler in the clump of cottonwoods out front. His boots didn't make any noise on the thick dust. He was near the trees when the squeaky hinges of the house door made their protest. He froze where he was, peering through the blackness, and saw a shape coming lightly and carefully down the porch steps, another shape emerging from the trees, then just one shape as the two of them clung together.

One voice whispered huskily "Red!"

The other, deeper voice said, "Peg, honey."

Clem had no idea of eavesdropping. He just didn't want them to know they'd been seen when they'd supposed they were alone; they might not like it. Without thinking about it, he ducked out of sight among the trees.

"Peg, listen." Red was talking rapidly and urgently, not like his own easy drawl. "I was over to Bensonville yesterday to see about a job with an outfit I used to ride for—"

"Did you get it?"

"Never even asked. I stopped in for a drink when I hit town, and got in a poker game. You bring me luck, honey." He laughed softly. "I won nearly six hundred dollars."

"Red!"

"And look, there was a fellow in the game who owns a little spread over there. Good grass and water, but he's had a couple of years of bad luck and got disgusted, wants to sell out. He'll take five hundred down and a note."

"You going to buy it?"

"Depends on you. Oh, I know I have my nerve asking you—it's going to mean plenty of hard work and mighty little money—"

"Red, I love you, and I hate seeing you on the sly like this. I hate sneaking around in the dark like a couple of horse thieves. If you can stand to settle down—" There was an interruption there, and when Peg spoke again, her voice sounded breathless. "You get back there and close the deal before that fellow changes his mind. Meantime I'll break the news to Dad. I expect he'll rare up and bellow like a bull, but he'll just have to get over it. By the time you come back for me, I'll be ready."

When Clem turned his face toward the bunkhouse, he was splitting the night with his own special discordant version of *Strawberry Roan*. Near the corral, he spotted a heavy figure that moved with a slight list to starboard. It was Walt, coming home with a skinful. Clem avoided him, not wanting anything to spoil the good way he was feeling.

THE storm came before morning, great sheets of rain that soaked into the thirsty soil. Some of the men went to stand outside the bunkhouse and hold up their faces to it, even opening their mouths to let it run down their throats. They laughed and yelled to each other, feeling, in their exuberant relief, like kids let out of school.

Walt lounged down to join them, a little sullen with his hangover, and announced that the Old Man wasn't home yet. "Guess he stayed in town when he saw it was going to rain, though it's not like him to let a little weather hold him up. And Peg's been acting

funny. Don't know what in blazes has got into her."

Clem turned his head away, feeling guilty and amused both, that he should know the answer Peg's brother didn't.

In the middle of the morning, when they were all absorbed in a stud poker game, they heard a couple of horses splashing up through the mud. "That'll be the Old Man," the dealer murmured. "Wonder who he's got with him," and was going on with the deal when an exclamation from the player who sat facing the window made them all look out. The next minute they were crowding through the door, regardless of the rain.

Jim Hudder was straddling one of the horses. The other one held a big man tied face down across the saddle, blood on his shirt—Old Man Whitaker.

Jim held up his hand to stop their questions. "No, he's not dead, but he's badly hurt. Somebody took a shot at him on his way home last night."

Walt strode forward, his face set hard, suddenly jolted into complete sobriety. "Who did it?"

"I don't know, Walt. He wasn't found till this morning, and he wasn't in any shape to talk. I don't know how many hours he'd been lying there. Doc Tracy says if he weren't made out of rawhide, he'd be dead. No sign, of course. This rain washed it all out."

"But who'd want to do it?" Walt demanded harshly. "He never had any real trouble with anybody, only that Red Dolan."

Clem's mouth was open for a hot protest, but Hudder cut in first. "He and that cattle buyer made a deal, and your Dad got five hundred in cash to bind the bargain. The buyer got drunk afterward, and he was being pretty loudmouthed about the big deal he put over. Almost anybody in town could have known how much money Mr. Whitaker was carrying."

"I have to get him up to the house," the marshal added heavily. "Come on, Walt. Reckon you'd better be the one to break it to Peg."

Walt turned to go, then swung around. His eyes, dark with pain and angry bewilderment, settled on Clem. "Where were you last night?"

"Me?" The unexpectedness of the question made Clem sound stupid.

"Yeah. You were sashaying around when I came home from town. I heard you whistling *Strawberry Roan*. Nobody else does that way off-key like you do. And you were mighty anxious not to talk to me."

"Why, I just went out to get some air, Walt, because I couldn't sleep. Goshalmighty, you don't think maybe I—"

Clem broke off, almost wanting to laugh, though he knew this wasn't a time for laughing. But the idea of anyone's thinking of him mixed up in something like this shooting was downright ridiculous.

"Come on, Walt," Hudder ordered wearily.

For two days the life of Block 7 seemed to center around the room where Old Man Whitaker hung on the slippery brink between living and dying. He'd been mostly unconscious or out of his head; there'd been no chance to question him about the man who'd put the bullet in him.

The evening of the second day, Red came back. Clem was just leaving the cookshack after supper when his eye was caught by the familiar tall shape swinging up toward the main house, challenge in the cock of the fiery head.

Clem couldn't let him walk in like that, not knowing. He hurried toward him, calling his name.

"Howdy, Clem."

If there were a touch of strain in the old grin, now was no time to think about it. Clem blurted out the whole story.

"Hell!" Red exclaimed softly. "That's tough. The Old Man had his ways, but he wasn't such a bad old son-of-a-gun. Well, I reckon Peg won't want to leave him till he's better or— I got to see her, though. Reckon you could get word to her?"

PEG was alone with her father. She nodded quietly when Clem delivered his message. "Stay here with Dad a few minutes, will you?"

"Sure, Peg." Clem didn't know just how long he sat there. When the door opened, he thought it was Peg till Walt's voice demanded, "What're you doing here, Cady?"

"Why—uh—Peg asked me to stay. She

wanted a little air." Clem started talking feverishly, anything that came to mind, to keep Walt here till Red was gone. He sighed with relief when Peg came back.

"Where've you been?" Walt frowned suspiciously.

"You might as well know now. I've been with Red."

"Dolan? What the hell's he doing around here?"

"Keep your voice down," Peg snapped, with her eyes on the bed. "He came to see me. We're going to get married, as soon as I can leave Dad. He's bought a little ranch."

"Marry that drifter? I reckon we'll hear something about that when Dad can talk! Ranch, huh? Where'd he get money for a ranch?"

"Won it in a poker game."

"That sounds like his style. It's the only way he'll ever get anything. Say—" Walt's eyes narrowed with a sudden thought—"how much was it?"

"Over five hundred dollars. Walt, where are you going?"

"After Dolan first, then in to town for Jim Hudder. Reckon I know where Red got that five hundred! Which way'd he go?"

"I won't tell you. You're out of your mind, Walt Whitaker—stark, raving crazy!"

"We'll see if I am! Get out of my way!"

Peg tried to block the door. She was tall for a woman, and strong, but not strong enough. Walt pushed her out of his way and thudded out of the house. Peg looked after him and then back at her father, her face twisted with worry. Her eyes went appealingly to Clem. "Go after him. Do something!"

It was easy to say "Do something." Red was already out of sight, and Walt was stamping over toward the corral like a wild man. Clem chewed his lip and thought harder than he'd ever thought in his life. If he only had Red to tell him what to do—but it was Red who was in a jam, and Clem had to figure a way out with what brains he had.

If Walt caught up with Red, it stood to reason that Red wasn't going to let himself be marched off to jail for something he hadn't done. And if he wouldn't go along peaceably, and Walt stayed in the mood he was in now, there was likely to be another shooting. Walt, the crazy fool kid, was no match for Red with a gun, and if he got himself killed, even in self-defense—well, could any girl marry a man who'd killed her own brother? Walt just had to be stopped.

Clem's feet were carrying him down to the corral, though his mind knew it wasn't any use. He wasn't big enough to stop Walt by force, and nobody could make him listen to reason right now. The only thing that would convince Walt he was wrong about Red was knowing who actually had taken a shot at the Old Man.

That was when the idea hit Clem—really hit him, dead center. He stopped short a minute, in a sort of awe at having conceived it all by himself, and then he was running toward Walt, stumbling in his high-heeled boots.

"Walt," he said breathlessly, "there's no use chasing after Red. He didn't shoot your Old Man."

"What do you know about it?" Walt snarled, stopping.

"I ought to know if anybody does. I did it."

"You?" Walt stared down at him.

"Yeah. Don't you remember you asked me where I'd been so late, that night when you saw me? Well, that was where." He stared into Walt's eyes, trying to will him to believe. He wasn't sure he'd made it yet.

"How come it was Dolan who had the five hundred dollars, then?"

"I gave it to him. He needed five hundred for the ranch, so I went partners with him." Maybe that sounded a little more likely than just giving away five hundred dollars. "He didn't know where or how I got the money, though."

"How'd you know Dad had money on him? You weren't in town."

"Yes, I was. You just didn't see me." It was amazing, Clem thought, how well he could do this kind of thing once he got started. He knew Walt's favorite hangout was the Longhorn Bar, so he took a chance and added, "I was in Clancy's place."

It had worked. He knew by the darkening of Walt's face. "Why, you—I ought to break your rotten little neck! Come on." He grabbed Clem's arm roughly. "We're going to see the law."

CLEM lay back on his cot in the jail-house and reflected contentedly that it had gone smooth as silk. He wasn't sure Jim Hudder had believed him, but that didn't matter. The important thing was to keep Walt cooled off till Jim got hold of the right man. Probably he would, pretty soon. Clem rolled over and went to sleep.

He was wakened by the sound of the door to the next cell clanging shut. Jim was standing outside the bars with an unreadable expression on his face. "Seems I have another candidate for who shot Whitaker."

Clem swallowed hard. "Red!"

Red glared at him. "Jim, I tell you he's lying. Can't you just look at him and see he never shot anybody?"

"I don't want to look at him," Jim said wearily, "or you either. You two argue it out between yourselves. If you can't settle it that way, try tossing a coin." He strode away, keys rattling.

Red looked down at Clem through the intervening bars and shook his head accusingly. "You crazy little rooster! What do you think you're up to?"

"Red, how come you—"

"It's all over town that you're in jail! As soon as I heard it, I figured—well, you never shot the Old Man, so the only reason you'd say you did is you figured somebody'd try to pin it on me—that jughead Walt, probably. Well, you didn't think I'd let you get away with it, did you?"

"But, Red," Clem protested, "there's no sense in both of us being in jail for the same thing."

"That's what I said. So you get Jim back here and explain to him—"

"No, Red! Don't you see, it doesn't matter about me. I have nobody to lose sleep over me. But you have Peg to think about. Look, Red, just this once you have to listen to me!"

Red lowered his long frame onto the cot and deliberately settled back and made himself comfortable. "You know, this isn't a bad little jail, as jails go."

"Red, please!"

"Nope. Till you get some sense into what you use for a head, we both stay here."

The argument continued off and on all day. The late afternoon light was slanting through the windows when Jim Hudder appeared again. He inserted the key into the lock on Clem's cell door.

"Whitaker," the marshal announced gently, "came to this morning enough to tell us who shot him. It was a saddle tramp that was in Clancy's when that cattle buyer was shooting off his mouth. And Doc Tracy says the Old Man's going to be all right, if hearing that Peg's set to marry you doesn't give him a relapse. So you two liars can take yourselves out of my jail before I decide to arrest you again for getting free board from the county under false pretences."

Out in the sunny street, Clem and Red looked at each other and grinned uncertainly.

"Well," Red said, "looks like all I have to worry about now is my future father-in-law. But I reckon Peg'll handle him all right. You know, I figure that in his way he loves her and Walt a lot. The way he picks at 'em all the time—well, some people have funny ways of showing their feelings."

"Yeah, I reckon."

"You know, though, Clem, it hardly seems right, your going back to work for a man you shot and robbed. Since my place was bought with money you stole for me, don't you think you'd better come help me and Peg run it?"

"But, Red," Clem stammered, "I thought you didn't want me to partner you any more!"

"Whatever gave you that notion?"

"Why, you said—"

"I said there was no sense in your drifting around after a tumbleweed like me. I didn't say I didn't want you to." For just a minute, Red's face was naked and sober. "When the Old Man said you weren't doing yourself any good trailing along with me, I thought maybe he was right." His eyes started to dance again as he added, "But that was before I knew you couldn't be trusted to keep yourself out of jail. Anyway, I'm not a tumbleweed any more. I'm a respectable cattleman. So how about it, kid?"

Clem blinked at the sunlight, feeling its warmth all through him. "Sure, Red. Anything you say."

OUT OF THE CHUTES

NOTHING makes a dent in the busy life of Manhattan like the Madison Square Rodeo. Even the circus, which plays nearly as long and to more people, doesn't make such an impression on midtown. There are more Ringling Bros. billboards put up, but the rodeo has its walking advertisements.

There's something eye-catching and glamorous about the top-hands. Their boot heels click more resoundingly than the ladies' spikes. Their blue jeans and Stetsons attract more glances than the flaming neon signs along the Great White Way.

They come in by automobile, train, plane or bus, and for a few weeks there are about a hundred of them, being gawked at from morning to night.

Until this year the stock used to be unloaded in the uptown freight yards and driven, ridden or carted halfway down the island to the Garden. But this year officials had to put a stop to that, because it causes too many traffic jams of curious spectators.

This year the stock was unloaded at a West Side yard, only a few blocks from Madison Square Garden. The job was done early on a Sunday morning, when no normal New Yorker is abroad—unless he hasn't been to bed yet. But plenty of them would have broken a lifelong habit and risen at dawn if they'd known what was going on.

The city loves the cowboys and the animals, but it must be admitted that few of the latter return the compliment. It goes without saying that the horses and bulls and calves don't enjoy the basement of Madison Square Garden, in spite of the most modern appointments and the abundant fodder.

As for the cowboys, most of them wouldn't set foot on Manhattan if it weren't for the $71,000 purse that the Garden puts up. For most of them, coming to New York is a big gamble. They have to risk a sizable stake for a share in that kitty. There's transportation East, and the return trip as well—though some of them don't worry about that till the time comes to depart, hoping they'll have won enough money to buy the trip home.

Then there's the matter of hotel bills. None of them go near the Waldorf or the Ritz, but even the dingiest, down-at-the-heels hotel charges what the cowboys consider exorbitant rates. The hotel bill is hardest for the cowboy who ordinarily sleeps in his trailer and cooks for himself. You just can't park your trailer and build your fire on the corner of Eighth Avenue and Fiftieth Street.

And all this is just to get him to New York and keep him alive during the three weeks the rodeo runs. He still has to shell out for entry fees—from as little as $30 (and you furnish your own saddle) for the wild-horse race, up to $100 for calf-roping.

The biggest rodeo of the year is not only expensive, but also, most of the time, it's dull for the contestants. There are so many performances and so many competitors that it's a long time between go-rounds. If a cowboy works only one event, he appears only seven times in three weeks—though of course he's expected to turn up regularly for the Grand Entry. There's plenty of time to kill.

So you see the cowboys, wandering around town, nursing a beer in a small bar, sitting listlessly in hotel lobbies, with neither the money nor the inclination to see the sights. Anyway, not till they've won.

But if they win, it's a different story. When their pockets are bulging, they agree with the city slickers that rodeo is a glamorous business, and New York is the greatest old town in the world.

Adios,

THE EDITORS.

Forty Mile Fence

By
DEAN OWEN

Clay said, "Go back, Kate. It's too risky"

THE STORY SO FAR: CLAY JANNER and JOE ALFORD return from a long cattle-buying trip to find that Alford's wife thinks he's dead and is about to marry rancher BYRD ELKHART to get him to knock down a fence that would hamper the other ranchers. Alford is afraid to fight Elkhart and, disgusted by his weakness, Nina throws herself at Clay. Insanely jealous, Elkhart vows he'll have Clay killed. Meanwhile Clay has fallen for KATE FRENCH but they quarrel, because Kate thinks Clay is a fiddlefoot who will never settle down. But she wants to go along when Clay plans to drive his cattle through Elkhart's fence. As this concluding installment opens, Kate has allayed Alford's jealousy of Clay by telling him she and Clay plan to marry. She tells Clay later, though, that she will not marry him. But he has just realized how much he wants her. . . .

CONCLUSION

ACCORDING to Clay's calculations there would be a full moon and, even though he disliked pushing a herd after dark, he knew it could give them time to get through Elkhart's fence and across his land before daylight.

He knew that even with his present crew Elkhart could not begin to patrol his forty miles of barbed wire fence effectively. Therefore their strategy was to try to pick an unguarded spot. After a conference with Kate and a look at a crude map he had her draw of Elkhart's property line, he chose a place about ten miles out of the way for their breakthrough. He hoped Elkhart would expect any fence cutter to take the easier route with a herd, and that point would be well guarded.

They had been on the trail some hours when, shortly after moonrise, they reached the spot Clay had picked. Kate rode up and sat looking at the fence. From his saddlebags Clay drew a pair of wire cutters.

"Are you still game to go through with it?" he asked her.

"Still game," she said, but he detected anxiety in her voice.

He cut the fence and, with his saddle rope, pulled the curling loose wires aside to clear the break. Then the black-haired Sam-Lennox gave the order to push the combined herds through the fence. It was a grim business and Clay knew what each rider was thinking. Elkhart had given warning that any man who cut his fence would be treated as a rustler.

He said to Kate, "Go on back, it's too risky." When she refused he added, "I'll sell your herd in Las Rosas. Or maybe you don't trust a gunrunner?"

"I trust you, Clay, and I'm going with you."

He reached out, and they clasped hands. When he felt her strong, warm hand in his he knew what he wanted, what he had to have.

"The gunrunning, the months in prison, Joe Alford—everything was worth it," he told her solemnly.

And she knew what he meant. Then, because he was caught up in the dream that had been realized almost too late, he did not immediately hear the sounds of danger.

Kate said sharply, "Somebody's coming."

He wheeled his horse and saw two riders not fifty yards along the fence, coming from the west. The two horsemen pulled up suddenly, evidently surprised to see a herd of cattle streaming through a break in the fence, and a group of strange riders hazing the beef. The strangers spun their mounts and roared back at a thundering run the way they had come.

Clay spurred after them, knowing it was probably two men Elkhart had sent out to patrol his fence. At first Clay thought he would be unable to overtake them. But then he began to gain, and fervently hoped he could head them off before they could report the cut fence to Elkhart.

Something winked back at him, and he heard an angry whine of metal beside his face. He jerked free his booted rifle, levered in a shell, and took quick aim, just as another red dot opened and closed ahead of him. He fired the rifle twice, and one of the shadows disappeared from the back of a horse. Clay jabbed in the spurs and soon passed a riderless horse and something that thrashed weakly upon the ground.

As he closed on the second man, the rider's horse suddenly stumbled. Clay saw him make a desperate effort to haul up on the reins and keep his seat. Then he was plunging out of the saddle. Clay held his rifle on the man as he got dazedly to his feet. It was the Elkhart cowboy who had been driving the wagonload of barbed wire the day the herd stampeded.

THE man, Bob Baily, spread his hands as if expecting to be shot. But Clay only ordered him to tell where Elkhart had his men stationed.

Baily said, "He has a camp six miles east, but the crew is strung out along the whole fence. If there's trouble the one who spots it is supposed to round up the other boys."

"You're riding with us to Las Rosas," Clay informed the man.

He disarmed Baily and the two of them rode back toward the break in the fence. When they passed the man on the ground Clay made Baily dismount and look the rider over. Baily struck a match, and they saw that the man had been shot in the left temple.

"Some shooting," Baily observed.

"Luck," Clay said. "Don't make me stretch it with you."

"I have no love for Elkhart. I draw his money but I'm not going to risk my neck for the likes of him." The man climbed into the saddle, regarded Clay a moment. "I suppose you've heard he's going to hang anybody who goes through the fence."

"That might take some doing," Clay said, and made Baily ride on ahead of him.

When he rode up with his prisoner, Kate gave a sigh of relief. The herd was through the gap in the fence, and moving north across range that had once been part of the Sombrero land that Elkhart had purchased not too many months ago.

By daylight they were several miles beyond the fence, but Clay was disappointed

when he saw that the mound of rock on the eastern bluffs, known as Hard Hat, was still ahead of them. He had counted on being far ahead of the rock by this time.

Suddenly he heard a distant roll of gunfire, carried an unknown distance in the clear air. He tried to localize the sound as another burst of fire reached him. It came from the southeast at a spot approximating the anchor point of Elkhart's fence. Clay's first thought was that some poor fool had tried to get through the fence at that obvious location where Elkhart would be sure to have men posted.

In that moment he thought of what this war had become; the battle of a range baron who wanted to fence in his land and deprive his neighbors access to an established trail had been changed to a war of reprisal.

Elkhart had been in love with Nina Alford and, having lost her once when she married, saw a second chance when her husband went to Mexico. And Clay knew that, much as he personally denied it, he was responsible to a certain extent for what had transpired here.

Had he not offered Alford a partnership in the gunrunning deal, there probably could have been an amicable solution to the problem of the fence. But Elkhart, thwarted in his desire for a woman, was going to turn this range into a blood bath.

An hour later, Clay was surprised to see Nina Alford, her hair loose about her shoulders, come pounding up on a spent horse. He wheeled away from the herd and managed to catch her just before she fainted. He lowered her to the ground, while Kate came up anxiously.

Then Nina's eyes opened and she clutched Clay's hands. "Elkhart's got Joe," she breathed. "He's going to hang him unless—"

"Unless what?"

Her eyes were frightened. "Unless you give yourself up."

Clay frowned. "Elkhart knew where to send you to find me?" And when the blonde head nodded, Clay said, "Then why doesn't he jump us?"

"He hasn't enough men," Nina said. "His crew is scattered along the fence." Her voice broke. "But he can still hang Joe."

"How'd Joe get himself into this mess?" Clay demanded.

As Nina explained it, last night Joe had started out with a gather of under a hundred head, and had run into Elkhart after he cut the fence. "I came with him," Nina said, "because he was still drunk. Elkhart disarmed the two men Joe had with him, and sent them back across the fence. Then he told me I could save Joe's life if I found you and got you to come back."

Clay caught up his horse and Kate said anxiously, "Take the whole crew, Clay. Don't try to do it alone."

"Keep the herd moving fast," he ordered roughly. "I didn't rot in a Mexican prison to come up here and turn my profit over to Byrd Elkhart."

Then he jerked a hand at Sam Lennox, and the black-haired rider came boiling up through the dust. Quickly he told Lennox how things stacked up, and offered him a hundred dollar bonus.

Lennox said, "I'll go, but not for the money. You saved my neck at the stampede. I haven't forgotten."

KNOWING where Joe was held because of Nina's description of the terrain, Clay and Sam Lennox put their mounts to a gallop. Later, Clay caught a flash of light, and realized that someone was watching them through field glasses. Quickly he mapped his strategy. When he had outlined it to Lennox, they split and rode toward the fence from opposite directions.

When Clay reached the crest of a hill, he saw how neatly Elkhart had trapped him. The rancher rested on a deadfall in the center of a small basin. Beyond was the cut fence and a small herd—Alford's, probably—grazing along the flats.

Elkhart had two men with him. One of them held three horses and the second stood beside Joe Alford's buckskin. Alford sat the saddle, his hands tied behind his back. Around his neck was a noose, and the rope was played out over a cottonwood limb and tied to the trunk.

Elkhart said, "I've sent word to the rest of my crew to head this way." His lips curled. "Two of my men are missing, or we'd have corraled the boys sooner than this. Those two were supposed to do the patroling. Don't

suppose you know anything about their disappearance, do you?"

Clay ignored the barb. "I'm here," he said. "What do you want?"

"I want your herd—for damages. My fence was cut. Turn over your beef to me, and put yourself in my hands so you can be turned over to the sheriff. Then I'll let Alford go."

"To hell with him, Clay," Joe Alford said, trying to make his voice sound tough, but failing.

Elkhart said, "Make one wrong move and I give Lew a signal—" he indicated the bow-legged man who stood beside Alford's buckskin—"to slap the horse out from under your friend."

Clay's lips were dry as he gauged the distance to that slender strand of hemp leading from Alford's neck to the cottonwood limb. Never had a rope appeared so small. And Clay knew, with a sinking heart, that if the horse went out from under Alford there was enough slack in the rope so that the resultant fall would break the redhead's neck. He knew that Elkhart had planned it that way.

Elkhart said, "Drop your gun, Janner, and tell the man who came with you to drop his. Come down here with your hands up. Then write an order to your men to turn over the herd to me."

Carefully Clay made his calculations. He was within 50 yards of Alford now, as he dismounted. He gauged wind and the drop from the higher elevation where he stood. If he fired and missed, the horse might spook and send Alford's heavy weight jerking at the end of the rope.

Elkhart said, "If you don't want to see your partner hang, you'll do what I say. You have no choice."

From a corner of his eye Clay saw Sam Lennox peering over the crest of a hill behind where Elkhart stood with his rider. The runty man Elkhart had called Lew had removed his hat, and now he stood with it in his hand, ready to slap the buckskin if Elkhart gave the signal. And it might take an hour or it might only take fifteen more minutes for Elkhart's crew to be gathered in from the fence.

Clay started down the slope as if to give up. He was sweating and he could hear the dull thud of his heart. Then he flung up his rifle and sighted. He heard Elkhart bawl an order, as the rancher sensed the play. The runty Lew slapped at the buckskin, and the horse roared away from the tree just as Clay fired. The slender rope parted as if cut with a knife and Alford stayed in the saddle, trying to balance himself with his knees against the awkwardness of his tied wrists.

Clay felt something slam into him and heard the roar of a gun. He saw the man standing near Elkhart suddenly go to his knees, then sprawl full length on the ground. There was firing from Elkhart and the runty man. Then they got their horses and spurred away.

Dazed, Clay got to his feet, aware that his shirt was wet and that he felt weak and light in the head. He staggered to his horse and rode to where Alford's buckskin was stuck in the brush. With a knife he freed the redhead's hands. Then they rode to the spot where Clay had last seen Lennox. The black-haired man was crumpled up, shot just below the heart. Clay made sure he was dead, then hurried into the saddle. There was not even time to bury him decently, he thought bitterly.

"Come on," he told Alford, and found his voice sounding strange in his ears. "If Elkhart's crew gets here, we're cooked."

Clay gave him a faint grin. "You're my partner." And suddenly he knew that somewhere in this world a man had to put down his roots. All of your neighbors couldn't be strong and bravely confident of coping with any crisis. There had to be some who were likable and when you'd have to help once in a while—men like Joe Alford.

The world wasn't perfect, and Clay suddenly knew he had been searching for perfection in land and in women. There was free grass in Montana, but there might be worse obstacles than barbed wire. And Kate—she had a temper and might be hard to handle, but where could a man do better?

JOE ALFORD said glumly, "It was the whisky that made me brave enough to cut Elkhart's fence."

"And he was waiting for you," Clay said. "You're lucky he didn't hang you right off."

"He would have if it hadn't been for Nina's

being with me. He figured it would be funny to send her to get you. Poetic justice, he called it."

They had gone several miles when Clay saw a group of riders heading in the direction of the fence. And he knew, as he and Alford ducked into a brushy canyon, that they were Elkhart's men. When they had gone, Clay reeled a little in the saddle, but managed to increase their pace.

Then, later, Alford said, "Reckon it was me who let Elkhart know you'd cut his fence. I bragged that if anybody got through it'd be you. I figured you and Kate would be across his range by this time."

Clay was holding his left arm. "Trailing a herd at night is slow business," he said.

Alford looked at the bloodied shirtsleeve, seeing it for the first time. "Clay, you've been hit!"

"Yeah," Clay muttered.

"We'd better stop and bandage it."

"We better get the hell out of here," Clay snapped. "It won't take Elkhart long to find his men. When he does they'll be after us."

When Clay finally caught up with his outfit he saw with satisfaction that the combined crew, his and Kate's, were pushing the herd as fast as possible. Kate saw the bloodied shirtsleeve and anxiously bandaged the flesh wound. When the job was done, he kissed her. Then they rode hard to catch up with the herd. Clay rode to each of his men and told them about Sam Lennox.

"You two boys will split the bonus I was going to give him," Clay said.

Shortly after noon Kate said they were now off Elkhart's range, and they slowed their pace. They watered the herd at a half-dry stream, then pushed on. Clay kept riding back, scouting their backtrail, expecting to see Elkhart's men riding to cut them off from Las Rosas. He was surprised when they didn't appear. His arm pained, and he felt light in the head from losing so much blood.

That night when they camped, Joe Alford sat by the fire with his arm around Nina's waist. "I'm staying put from now on, Clay. If you were to come up with the best gun-running deal in the world, I'd turn you down."

Clay gave him a faint smile. "You don't have to worry about that. It would take more than a chance at running guns to get me away from here." He looked across the fire at Kate. "In fact, I doubt if there's anything at all that would get me away from here."

The talk grew serious, and Clay was of the opinion that a lawyer should be hired and sent to the territorial capital to pressure against Elkhart's fence.

"Once he knows we mean business, I think he'll back down."

Nina looked grave. "You don't know Byrd Elkhart. He won't give in easily."

"Then why hasn't he jumped us?" Clay demanded.

"He's got something else up his sleeve," Nina Alford said. "You can bet on that."

Clay rose, jerked his head at Joe Alford, and the two of them saddled up and rode out to relieve two of the men guarding the herd.

When they had ridden off into the darkness, Kate said, "How is it with you and Joe, Nina?"

"It's good," Nina said. She shuddered. "Sometimes I think I've had troubles with Joe. But what if I'd married a man like Byrd Elkhart?"

"I guess none of us knew him very well," Kate admitted.

"And how about you?" Nina said. "Has Clay asked you to marry him yet?"

Kate stared down at her clenched hands. "One minute things are good between us and the next—"

"It's only the good parts of it that count," Nina said. "Forget the rest. It took me a long time to learn that." She was silent for a moment. "Now I realize that, as Clay said, Joe went to Mexico so he could come home with a herd and have as much as I did. I can see now that he felt bad about my having a ranch and his having nothing at all."

The silence built up between them. Finally, Kate said, "I won't feel right until this herd is in Las Rosas and sold."

CLAY caught his first glimpse of Las Rosas some days later. The railroad had brought a collection of frame buildings, corrals and cattle pens. He thought glumly, as he stared at the steel rails, that this was the railroad that had been expected to come through Reeder Wells. And because

of that possibility, and the greed of a few men, Kate's brother had needlessly died.

They rode down and turned their cattle into one of the empty pens beside the tracks. Just as Clay gave orders to shut the gate, he saw a familiar figure coming toward them. It was Sheriff Bert Lynden.

Lynden swung down, his eyes, under his bushy brows, showing an intense dislike for Clay Janner. He handed him a paper. "This is a court order." He jerked a thin hand at the cattle milling in the enclosure. "You don't move that herd till you satisfy a judgment for damages."

Clay shoved the paper into his pocket, eying the sheriff with distate. "This Elkhart's idea?"

The sheriff gave an emphatic bob of his head. "You cut his fence, trespassed on his land. You're going to pay for that before this herd is sold."

The sheriff mounted and rode off toward town. Kate came up to stand at Clay's side. "Does that include my cattle?"

"Yeah." Then he suddenly caught up his horse. "But they're not going to get away with it."

Kate's eyes were anxious. "Clay, you've got a bad arm. Don't try to do anything foolish."

"You think it's foolish stopping a man like Elkhart?" he shot at her, and spurred his horse toward town.

At the bar in the Frontier House, he found Josh Ruskin. The cattle buyer was glum. "I feel sorry for you, Janner," Ruskin said, "but I feel sorrier for myself. I can use that herd right now. The cars are ordered. But we can't make a move as long as Elkhart has the sheriff on his side."

Clay said grimly, "We'll see about that. Is Elkhart in town?"

Ruskin, who stood at the bar, facing the window, said, "He just rode in."

Clay followed his gaze and saw Byrd Elkhart, wearing a black suit and a white shirt, swing down from a sorrel. With him were Lon Perry and two Arrow riders. Clay turned to Ruskin.

"Will you back me up if I try to run a bluff about that fence of his?"

Ruskin looked worried for a moment; then his face hardened. "If Elkhart keeps up these tactics I'll be out of business around here. Sure, go ahead, Janner."

Clay jerked his head and Ruskin followed him outside to the walk, where Elkhart and his men were standing in a tight little group. At sight of Clay, Elkhart's yellow-brown eyes narrowed.

"Did you come to settle up for the damage you did my property?" he demanded.

Clay stood with hands on his hips. He slowly shook his head, and let his gaze slip to Lon Perry. The Arrow *segundo* had stepped away from his horse, his pale eyes watchful.

"You can't get away with this business," Clay told Elkhart in a loud voice. He noticed that a crowd was gathering, and waited a moment while more men drifted up. "That fence of yours will never stand up in court."

"We'll see about that," Elkhart said confidently. "I've got money enough to let this case drag on for years. What about that?"

Clay jerked a thumb at Josh Ruskin. "This cattle buyer has a stake in this country, and so have a lot of other people. If you try to force that judgment on me, Ruskin is prepared to carry this to the territorial governor."

Elkhart looked at Ruskin, but the cattle buyer did not waver. "He's right, Elkhart," Ruskin said.

"I don't scare worth a damn," the rancher muttered, but Clay could see that he was showing a faint worry. He apparently had not counted on the cattle buyer's siding against him.

"It's competition that makes good business," Clay said loudly, "and Ruskin's company can't do business in this country if a man like Elkhart tries to hog it all. Elkhart can just about set his own terms for beef on this range. It's no good that way."

"The hell with you," Elkhart snarled.

AT THE edge of the crowd Clay noticed Sheriff Bert Lynden listening attentively. "I'm going to ignore that court order," Clay told Elkhart.

"You do and you'll be in jail," Elkhart said.

"Maybe," Clay agreed, "but I think Lynden knows when he's licked. This country is growing, and next election maybe he'll have to

count votes from the little outfits as well as the big. If he wants to wear that badge another term, he'd better quit catering to men like you and do an honest job."

The crowd had turned to look at him and a man said, "How about that, Sheriff?"

Lynden turned on his heel, walked down the street, and disappeared inside the Las Rosas Hotel. Elkhart, watching him go, turned red in the face. He turned in anger on Clay Janner.

"You move those cattle," he stormed, forgetting his easy manner, "and you'll be in for trouble."

Clay gave the rancher a tight smile. "I've already had plenty of trouble since I came to New Mexico. A little more won't hurt."

Elkhart jerked his head at Lon Perry and his two Arrow men, and they moved on down the street. Clay watched as they filed into the hotel.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Bert Lynden doesn't get a dressing down from Elkhart," Ruskin said, "for not making a stand out here."

"I'm hoping I can talk my way out of this, Ruskin," Clay said. "But if talk won't work—" He dropped a hand to his belted .44.

"I think you made an impression on Lynden with that talk about election," Ruskin said.

"It was all bluff."

"Possibly," Ruskin admitted, "but Elkhart must be worried about that fence, or we'd have had a showdown here and now."

Clay nodded and said, "If it comes to trouble, you keep out of it. I don't want your blood on my hands."

"Rather odd way to put it, Janner," Ruskin said with a wry smile. "I'm already in this, up to here." He made a gesture at his throat. "And if I buy your cattle I'll be in deeper."

"Don't jeopardize your own position by ignoring that court order," Clay warned. "They'll have you in jail."

"Look, my company isn't the biggest by a long shot. Elkhart has been dickering with one of the big boys to handle his beef, once he gets a corner on things around here. I'll be out in the cold any way you look at it,

[*Turn page*]

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when and if that happens. Elkhart will have frozen out the little outfits, and I'll have to look elsewhere for business."

Clay said, "Let's sit tight until we see if Lynden is going to worry about his own job or be scared into taking orders from Elkhart again."

The two men parted, and Clay returned to the camp at the edge of town, where he told Alford and the others what had happened. Then he called Bob Baily aside and gave the Arrow man back his gun.

"I'm giving you a chance to clear out," Clay said. The rider answered that he sure appreciated the good treatment he had received. "I'm heading for Arizona," Baily said. "Elkhart will blame me for letting you capture me."

Clay watched him ride out. The man had helped them push the cattle along the trail, and he was grateful for the extra help. Bob Baily wasn't a bad sort and Clay silently wished him luck.

Because the two girls said they would like to eat in town, Clay and Alford saddled up and, leaving the crew to guard the herd, rode in. When they passed the Las Rosas Hotel, Clay saw Elkhart and Lon Perry on the veranda watching them. At the far end of the block, Clay and the others entered the A-1 Cafe. Clay sat with his back to the wall at a corner table.

Kate, noticing this, looked tense and kept watching the front door.

As they ate, Clay was happy to note that there was open talk against Elkhart and his methods. Occasionally a patron would grin at Clay or lift a hand. It was comforting that these men apparently favored his stand against Elkhart. It was different here at Las Rosas, for Elkhart's power did not extend this far; it was not like Reeder Wells, where Arrow ran things with a high hand. But even though things seemed to be going his way, Clay was dubious about the outcome.

The Las Rosas Drygoods Store was still open when they finished their meal, and Nina asked Kate to go shopping with her. Clay and Joe Alford went to the Frontier House for a drink, saying they would join the two women in front of the Mercantile in half an hour.

NINA ALFORD was looking over a bolt of yard goods when Byrd Elkhart entered from the rear door and came swiftly to her side. Nina's face went white and she cast a frantic look at Kate, who stood with her back turned, scanning a case of spooled thread.

"I wanted this last talk with you," Elkhart said in a tight whisper. His face showed strain, but there was still a hard set to his mouth, and his yellow-brown eyes were unrelenting. "It's within your power to stop this thing," the rancher went on, watching the blond woman. "Send Alford on his way and marry me."

Nina's voice was mocking to cover her fright. "I thought you wanted nothing to do with me after that day with Clay Janner."

"That's over and forgotten," Elkhart said, and reached for her hand.

But Nina stepped away from him. "You'd better get out of here, Byrd."

His eyes gleamed wickedly. "It's only fair to warn you that I hold top cards in this game."

She faltered, then said bravely, "I don't believe it."

Elkhart's lips stirred in a faint smile. "You'll believe it when you see Clay Janner hanged."

She caught her breath and pressed the back of a hand against her lips. Then, when she had recovered from her surprise, she said scornfully, "You can't get away with lynching him."

"This will be legal, Nina." He caught her by the arms, peering down into her pale face. "Marry me, or I'll have the sheriff swear out a warrant for Janner's arrest."

"I already have a husband," she reminded him.

"Divorce him. I've wanted you for years, Nina. I won't be put off."

Nina stared up into his eyes. "Your threatening me about Clay Janner won't change my mind."

"This is no longer a simple case of fence cutting or trespassing. Janner murdered one of my men in cold blood."

"You'll have a time proving that," she said, desperately trying to sound confident.

"I've got a witness," Elkhart said, and

waited a moment. When she made no reply, he said, "I see, Nina, that you're going to stick with Joe Alford."

Abruptly he turned on his heel and headed for the rear door. He threw up his head and glared at Kate French, who had come up behind them during the talk. Then he went outside, and Kate could hear his heavy tread in the alley.

She seized Nina by the arm. "Come, we've got to warn Clay."

Nina seemed dazed. "You overheard Elkhart's boast?"

"Yes. And I have a feeling he'll make it good."

But it was Josh Ruskin instead of the two women who brought the grim news to Clay. In the crowded, smoke-filled barroom the cattle buyer told of the rumors sweeping the town. Sheriff Lynden had a warrant for the arrest of Clay Janner for murder, and he was only awaiting Elkhart's word to serve it.

"Murder," Clay echoed, then remembered the man he had shot out of the saddle the night he captured Bob Baily.

"And Elkhart's got a witness," Ruskin said. "They've got you this time, Clay, unless you can figure a way out."

Although it was only conjecture, Clay thought he could guess what had happened. Elkhart's men had rounded up Bob Baily when Clay turned the man loose. He told Ruskin about it.

The cattle buyer looked grim. "You spared this Baily's life, and that's the thanks you get."

"Yeah," Clay agreed, "but sometimes a man doesn't have much choice if there's a gun at his head. It was probably either testify against me or get shot down."

Joe Alford said anxiously, "What are we going to do, Clay?"

"I'm going to finish this once and for all," Clay said, and started for the door.

Ruskin caught him by an arm. "The sensible thing to do is for you to get out of town until we can straighten out this mess."

Clay pushed the hand from his arm, saying, "But I'm not very sensible."

Joe Alford took a hitch at his gunbelt. "I'm going with you, Clay." [*Turn page*]

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"You're staying here!" Clay strode for the door and stepped out into the street.

HE FELT utterly frustrated and confused, as his gaze swept both sides of the street. It was still fairly light, so that he could instantly see any danger and evaluate its potential. But only a handful of men and a few women, hurrying along the walks, were on the street at this, the supper hour.

A faint flush of sunset lay across the high peaks beyond the town. It would be ironical to come this far, Clay thought, and then lose it all to a man like Elkhart. He looked toward the south end of town, where his herd was penned. Those cattle represented everything he had in this world, and he was about to lose it all.

Two men appeared suddenly. Turning on to the main street from an alley was the fleshless, uncertain Sheriff Bert Lynden, holding a piece of paper in his hands. It was probably a warrant, Clay thought. At his side was Lon Perry, and even at this distance Clay could see that the Arrow *segundo* wore a badge on his shirt.

A voice at his elbow said, "Looks like Elkhart's going to make you sweat for this one, Clay. He had Lynden make Lon Perry a deputy. If you shoot Perry, you'll really be up against the law, and no fooling."

Without turning his head, Clay said tightly, "Keep out of it, Joe."

Nina and Kate French had come out of the drygoods store and started to cross the street. Clay shouted for them to keep back. The sound of Clay's voice brought the sheriff and Lon Perry up short. They hesitated in the center of the street, as if jerked to a halt by an invisible barrier. Lynden said something to Perry, and the sheriff stepped to the boardwalk on the opposite side of the street.

"You're under arrest, Janner"" he shouted.

But Clay was watching Lon Perry, who was coming slowly toward him, the deputy sheriff's badge plain on the front of his shirt. A movement in an alley caught Clay's eye and he saw Byrd Elkhart, holding a rifle, standing in the opening.

"I'm with you, Clay," Joe Alford said.

Clay noticed the deep-seated fear betrayed in his partner's voice. Alford started off down the walk, and had barely hit the street when a blossom of orange licked out from the alley mouth. Alford spun around and pitched over on his face.

Nina began to scream and started to run toward her husband, but Kate French jerked her back with one hand on a wrist. In that moment Clay saw that Kate French held a revolver pointed at Sheriff Bert Lynden. The sheriff stood woodenly on the walk, staring at the gun, his mouth open, the warrant still clutched in his hand.

Clay's mouth was dry, but he felt strangely calm as he stepped over the crumpled figure of Joe Alford and advanced on Lon Perry. He saw the gunman's cold eyes, saw him come to a halt. Twenty yards to Perry's right Byrd Elkhart stood in the alley, holding a revolver now instead of the rifle.

Perry said, "I'm arresting you—"

Clay said, "The hell you are," and dragged up his gun.

The sudden movement brought a flash of pain from the wound in his left arm, and it slowed him perceptibly. He knew he could never get set before Perry and Elkhart caught him in a crossfire. Then someone was shooting from behind him, and he saw Elkhart stagger against a building front and reel wildly across the walk, dropping his gun. As Elkhart went down, Clay felt his right leg knocked from under him, and found himself lying on his back.

Lon Perry had fired again, missing the second time, but now his gun lowered to cover the man in the street. Clay rolled away, dirt and pebbles stinging his face as the bullet struck the hard ground near his head. He emptied his gun but Lon Perry kept walking toward him. Then Perry's face went slack and he fell loosely.

Josh Ruskin, a cigar clenched in his teeth, and holding the gun he had used on Byrd Elkhart, stepped up, tore the badge from the front of Perry's shirt, and dropped it in his pocket. Clay got to his feet as Kate ran up to hold him with an arm about his waist.

A crowd gathered, looking at the bodies in the street. They carried Joe Alford into the Frontier House.

"Thanks, Kate," Clay said, "for keeping a

gun on Lynden. It whittled down the odds."

"I don't think he'd have joined in anyway," she said. "He was too frightened."

CLAY suddenly sank to the edge of the walk. Josh Ruskin had crossed the street, and now the cattle buyer returned with the sheriff.

Ruskin said, "Clay, the sheriff says that Lon Perry stole that deputy's badge. He wasn't sworn into office at all."

"How's Elkhart?" Clay asked.

"Dead," a man said.

The crowd looked at the sheriff, and Lynden shifted his feet nervously. "As long as Elkhart is the one who swore out the warrant, and he's dead, well—" Lynden tore up the warrant and let the pieces of paper fall into the street. He looked hopefully at the crowd. "Your sheriff was only doing his duty."

But no one answered, and in a moment Lynden turned away. His manner indicated he knew he was through as sheriff.

Joe Alford had been shot in the collarbone. When Clay limped into the Frontier House, where Joe had been laid out on a pool table, Nina turned, her eyes wet.

"Joe didn't let you down. He tried to fight."

"Of course he didn't let me down," Clay said. "Why should he? He's my partner." He clasped Joe Alford's hand.

"Damn it, Clay, he shot me before I could even sling up my gun," Alford said.

"Josh Ruskin's the one who saved this day," Clay said. "He killed Elkhart, and that means the end of the forty mile fence."

Kate, her arm still about Clay's waist, said, "It's the end of the fence, but the start of other things. Many others." She smiled.

Somebody brought up a chair, and Clay sat down. Ruskin slit his trouser leg with a knife blade. A bandage was produced, and the wound cleaned and bound.

"Got to take care of you," Ruskin said. "You're going to ship a lot of cattle."

Clay winced as Kate finished tying the bandage on his leg. "Is there any law in New Mexico that says a man can't get married sitting down?"

Kate blushed. "Let's find out, shall we?"

THE END

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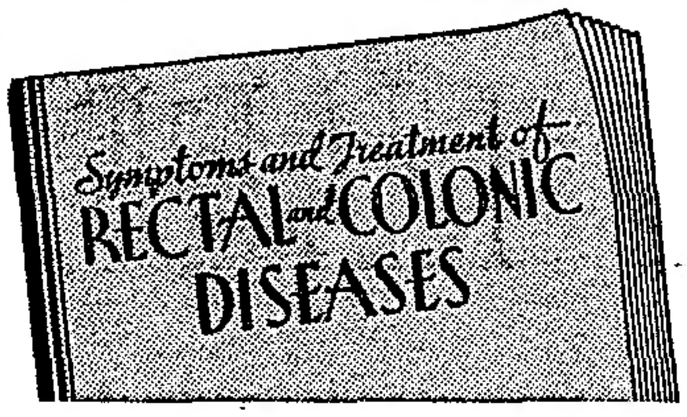

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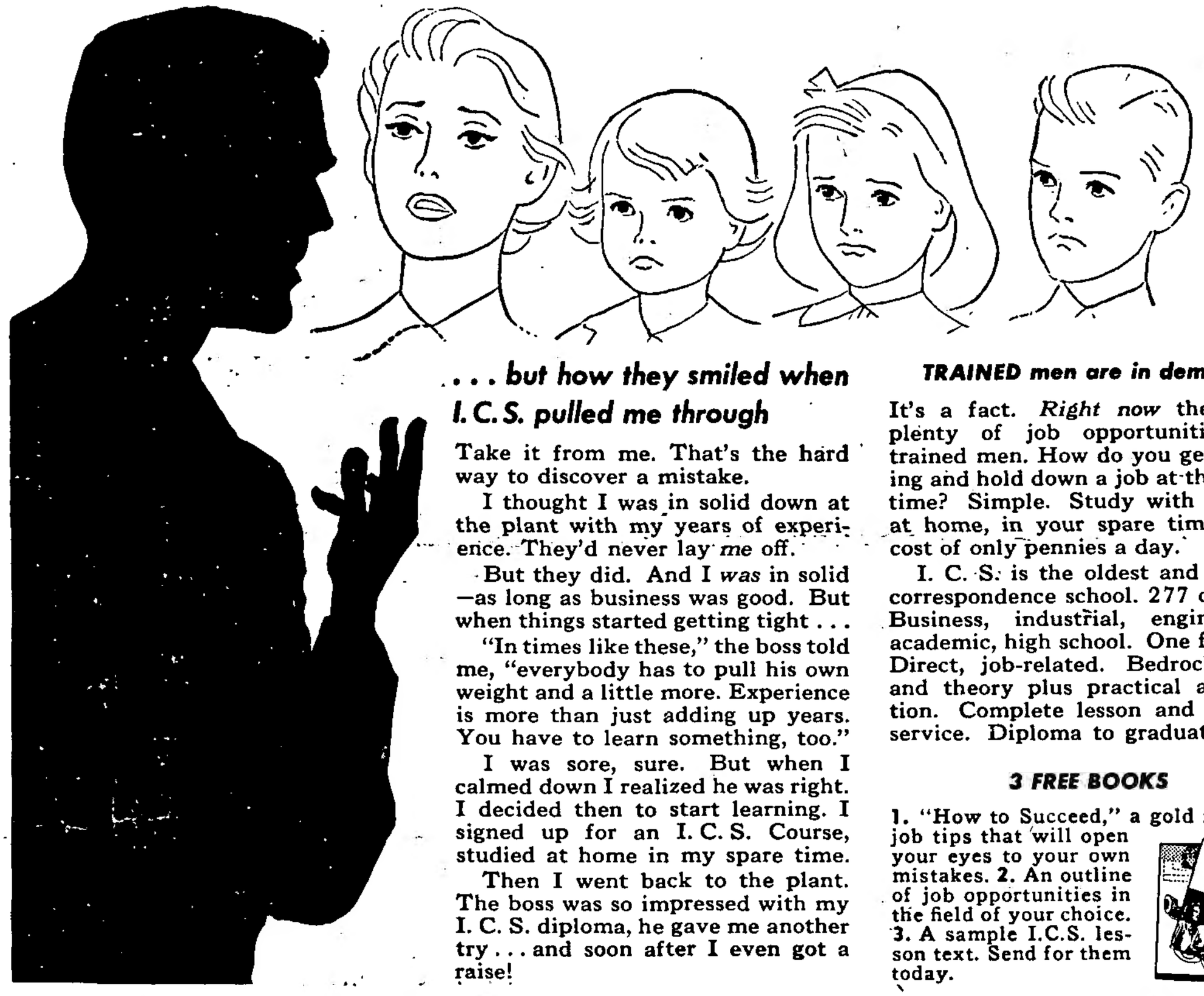

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